

DODO
PUBLISHING

T R A V E L & A D V E N T U R E

THE HILLS OF BURUNDI

JAMES WEBSTER

T R A V E L & A D V E N T U R E

ILLUSTRATED



UNABRIDGED

*For Susan & Rachel,
for the riders,
and for everyone who showed us Burundi.*

Foreword

This is the only part of the book that I have fully written myself. The rest has been ghostwritten by Claude Code, an AI large language model. It is, therefore, cheating, but I'm no writer, and without AI, this wouldn't exist. The words that follow aren't mine but the product of a *stochastic parrot*; they are the most probable sequence of words given their input. The words that follow are also not, not mine. I took notes as I went, and the AI has captured a great deal of what I thought, said and felt. I spend my professional life working with AI every hour, so I can spot how AI writes. It can feel just a little off centre (as my handlebars did on the Bujumbura shakedown ride). My hope is that you can overlook the wobbles in the writing and still take away something of what it was like to spend two amazing weeks in Burundi.

For those that were there; please forgive the hallucinations both human and machine. Writing less than a week after returning to the UK my memory had real difficulty pinning down which hotel went with which day and who we saw and when. Let me know where I have gone wrong and I will correct and republish.

James
Oxford, June 2026

Contents

Prologue	6
Bujumbura	15
The Road to Matana	26
The Source	38
Carried	50
The Empty Quarter	62
Workhorses	73
The Drum and the Farm	88
One Child at a Time	101
The Reckoning, then Home.	105
Epilogue	116
About Great Lakes Outreach	122
A Note on How This Was Made	124

The Route



Bujumbura to Bujumbura · seven riding days
604 km / 375 mi · 17,345 m / 56,906 ft climbed

PROLOGUE

The Terrifying Triangle

LONDON TO BUJUMBURA · 2ND–3RD OF JUNE



The boxed bike, the night before.

I. THE LAST ORDINARY NIGHT

It begins, as the great adventures of our age so often do, with a Premier Inn.

I am pushing a hotel luggage trolley down a very narrow corridor — on it, a very large cardboard bike box with my bike sealed away inside it, and my suitcase balanced on top — having just proved to myself that the £15 they wanted for an early check-in would have bought me precisely half an hour and not a minute more. There is a lift, which the trolley and I just about fit into together. There is a small speed ramp laid across the corridor — bumpity-bump — and the reason for the speed ramp turns out to be two robot vacuum cleaners going quietly about their business at ankle height, entirely invisible from behind a fully laden luggage trolley. One of them slides straight under a wheel and wedges there, beeping, until a member of the housekeeping staff has to come out of a room and rescue the poor contraption from the undercarriage. We get past it, and past its companion, and finally make the door.

Challenge one, complete.

I tell this not because it matters but because it is the last entirely ordinary thing that happens to me for a fortnight. By this time tomorrow I will be on the wrong side of the Mediterranean; the day after that I will be standing in the heat of a different continent altogether, at the bottom of a hill I have been thinking about — if I am honest, slightly dreading — for months. But tonight there is only the Premier Inn, the boxed bike propped against the wardrobe like a coffin delivered to the wrong room, and the particular insomnia of a man who has agreed to a thing and can no longer quite remember why.

How I came to be here is, I am sorry to report, almost entirely my wife's fault.

II. HOW I CAME TO BE HERE

A couple of years ago, for my birthday, Rachel watched me buy a lovely Genesis gravel bike — a Day One, as it happens, which I would later decide was a small private omen — and it is from that bike that all of this unspools. It was she who first mentioned the ride. She has been on the Great Lakes Outreach mailing list for years, paying it the close and faithful attention I have always meant to and never have, and somewhere in among the newsletters there was a thing called the Tour du Burundi: a charity bike ride the length and breadth of a country I could not, that evening, have placed within five hundred miles on a map. *Wouldn't that be amazing*, she said, *on your new bike?*

I did not take it seriously. But the thing about a notion like that is that it does not leave; it lodges somewhere behind the sternum and waits. And so last autumn, idly, half meaning nothing by it, I clicked the link to enquire — and before I had properly understood what was happening I was on the telephone to a very nice man, and the very nice man was so warm and so encouraging that by the end of the call I had signed up, cheerfully, of my own free will, and was already wondering how to tell Rachel that her idea had escaped.

I had looked, you understand, at the distances. Eighty kilometres here, a hundred and ten there; I had ridden those sorts of numbers up and down the lanes of West Oxfordshire and lived. What I had not done — and here, I'm afraid, is the whole of my character in a single omission — was look at the *elevation*. It had not occurred to me that Burundi is a mountainous country; that its main roads go

not around the hills but doggedly, vertically, over the top of every last one of them. When this was gently pointed out, it became clear that my beloved Genesis, with its eight lovely sealed, maintenance-free hub gears, would expire on the first real climb. The recommendation was a proper road bike with a proper range of gears. And so I did the only sensible thing, which was to ask, for Christmas, for a *second* bicycle — a secondhand road bike I bought for a few hundred pounds from a very good man in Crawley, the one near Witney, who keeps a shed full of other people's old machines. I have since fitted it with lower gears and fatter tyres, and it is that bike, and not the birthday one, now boxed against the wardrobe.

There is one more confession to make, and it is the worst of them, because it is the one I did entirely to myself. I am the sort of man who builds spreadsheets for pleasure, and some weeks before the off, unable to leave well alone, I took the same tools I use for ordinary, harmless things and built myself a best-guess route for day one, and out of it drew an elevation profile. The profile drew me a triangle. Twenty, perhaps thirty kilometres of more or less unbroken ascent, rising and rising and not stopping — a clean, geometric, wholly unanswerable triangle, the simplest shape there is and the most frightening I have ever generated. I stared at it until it acquired a personality. I reconciled myself, privately and without telling anyone, to the genuine possibility that I might have to get off and walk it, or sit in shame in the support vehicle while it ground up the mountain without me. By the time I boxed the bike, my entire ambition for the fortnight had narrowed to a single line, repeated like a charm: *if I can just get through day one, then maybe — maybe — I can do this.*

III. FOUR STRANGERS AND A GREAT MANY BICYCLES

I had arrived at the Premier Inn first, which gave me the doubtful privilege of being the one already in the lobby when the others appeared. The first was Simon Evans, who I would later learn descends mountains like a man who has somewhere urgent to be, and who that evening was simply a friendly stranger in the way that everyone is, on the first night, a friendly stranger. Then Tim, and then Jenny, and the four of us worked out — slowly, and with the particular embarrassment of people who have all made the same wrong assumption — that the rest of the party were not, in fact, all booked into this one Premier Inn, but scattered hopefully across the airport's hinterland of identical hotels.

So there were four of us. We had a couple of drinks. We were, all of us, on our very best behaviour — laughing a little too readily at one another's jokes, the way you do when you have agreed to spend a fortnight at close quarters with people you met twenty minutes ago and are quietly auditing for signs of how it is going to go. And underneath the good behaviour, plainly, the same nerves: not one of us was entirely sure what we had signed up for. We made an early night of it.

The morning came at an hour the morning has no business coming at. There is a photograph, timestamped ten to five, of the lot of us crammed onto a bus in the dark, looking like a stag party that has badly miscalculated. There had been a proper discussion, the night before, about *which* bus — whether we might save a few pounds on the public service rather than the hotel shuttle — the kind of discussion that gives a group of new acquaintances something safe to be passionate about. *Race Across the World* had just finished its run on the television, and so naturally we cast ourselves as rival teams,

racing imaginary competitors to the check-in desk, hauling boxed bicycles on and off the bus with the grim efficiency of people who suspect they are being filmed.

At the airport the comedy curdled, briefly, into genuine dread. I had spent the previous day reading and re-reading the airline's conditions for carrying a bicycle, and had discovered, in the small print, a size limit that did not apply *only if* the box was declared as sports equipment — a distinction on which, it seemed, an unknowable and possibly enormous sum of money now hung. We shuffled towards the desk praying, quite literally, that the boxes would go through. They went through. There was a little querying, a little holding of breath, and then nothing: not one of us paid a penny. There is a second photograph, taken just after the bag-drop, in which a dozen grown adults are wearing the specific, slightly unhinged smile of the reprieved.



The long crawl down the length of Africa.

IV. INTO AFRICA

The first flight was a short hop to Brussels, and it is at the Brussels gate that the trip serves up its first small absurdity. At the stand next to ours, Brussels Airlines were launching a new route — to Kilimanjaro, of all the on-the-nose destinations — and had laid on men in suits to make speeches about it. They had also, crucially, laid on food. Somebody spotted it; the word went round; and within ninety seconds a charity cycling team bound for one of the poorest countries on earth was working its discreet way through a launch buffet of smoked-salmon bagels, courtesy of Brussels Airlines and their new service to a mountain none of us were going anywhere near.

Then the long flight south, direct to Bujumbura, and the small screen set into the seat in front of me, which I confess I watched more than any film. There is a view on it where the aeroplane crawls across a map, and I sat and followed our little icon as it left the south of France and went out over the Mediterranean, and understood, with a jolt I had not expected, that I was about to cross into African airspace for the first time in my life. Below, when the cloud allowed, the sea gave way to a great deal of sand. And here is the thing the map teaches you that no atlas ever quite does: how astonishingly *quickly* you clear the whole of Western Europe — there and gone, France a brief inconvenience — and then how slowly, how patiently, how endlessly, you have to inch your way down the sheer vastness of Africa to get anywhere at all.

We landed in the evening, and scrambled off the plane with the unseemly haste of people who have been warned. Simon — Simon Guillebaud, the man whose family and whose life this whole thing turns out to belong to, of whom much more later — had told us the visa queue could swallow hours. What he had not advertised was that he holds a Burundian passport as well as a British one, and knows everyone, and within what felt like minutes had shepherded the entire bewildered column of us through and out the other side in something close to record time. The bikes went into the back of a pickup. We went into a coach. And we ground our way through the warm dark of the city to KCC, which would be our base for the days to come.

I should record, because at the time it felt like the only thing that mattered in the world, that every single bicycle came off that aeroplane intact, and that not one bag was lost. Simon mentioned, lightly, that the trip loses a piece of luggage roughly once a year, on

average. We lost nothing. And so I stood in the courtyard of a conference centre in Bujumbura, a desk-bound, soft-handed, almost-fifty-year-old man a very long way from the lanes of West Oxfordshire, with my second-hand Crawley bicycle safe in its box and my whole future narrowed to a single triangle — and somewhere out there in the dark, an hour or two to the south, waiting, was the hill.

Bujumbura

4TH–5TH OF JUNE · TWO DAYS IN THE CITY, BEFORE THE WHEELS
TURNED



A balcony over Bujumbura, the lake beyond.

I. A BALCONY OVER THE LAKE

I wake on the first morning to a sky doing something I had not expected of Africa: blue, high, scattered with the kind of small white clouds that promise a fine day in any language. I go out onto the balcony, and there, away beyond the rooftops, is Lake Tanganyika — one of the deepest and oldest lakes on earth, holding the morning light flat and silver — and it occurs to me, standing there in a country I could not have found on a map a year ago, that I have a whole day before I need to be frightened of anything. We are not riding yet. We are in Bujumbura, and we will be here for two days, and the hill can wait.

Our base is a place called KCC — the Kings Conference Centre — and at some point that morning Simon walks us round it. He shows us the original building and the newer extension we are sleeping in, and as he goes he tells us what it took to put here: the years, the cost, the slow business of getting hold of the land. But the thing he keeps returning to is not the bricks. It is a principle, and it turns out to be the principle behind everything we are about to see. The aim, he says, was never to build something merely *adequate* — something that gets by, that limps along on the goodwill of donors who might one day look away. The aim was to build something genuinely excellent that also pays for itself, and then throws off a surplus, so that it can fund the next thing, and the next. In business you would call that a profit. Out here, where every well-meaning project is one funding cycle from collapse, it is closer to a kind of independence. A good hotel, run well, that quietly bankrolls a ministry. I will spend the next fortnight watching that same unlikely idea — *excellent, and self-sustaining* — turn up again and again, in a hospital, on a farm, in a sewing room, and I will keep being surprised by it, and I will keep being wrong to be surprised. The swimming pool, I should add, is empty: freshly renovated and waiting to be filled, the one thing not yet finished. We are promised it will have water in it by the time we get back. Hold that thought.

II. THE PEOPLE WE FLEW HERE TO MEET

Because — and it took me longer than it should have to grasp this — we have not really come for the cycling at all. The cycling is the excuse. We have come for the people, and over these two days they arrive in a procession that quietly dismantles me.

I will not tell you their stories here, because two of them have earned the right to be told properly, in their own time, later in this book, and to spoil them now would be a kind of theft. But I will introduce them, because I want you to know they were real men in a real room before they were anything I wrote down. There is a lean, courteous man who, when he shakes my hand, I would have filed under *parish priest* a dozen times before *athlete* — and who turns out to have been one of the fastest half-milers Africa ever produced, and to have done, with the worst thing that ever happened to him, something I am not yet ready to describe. And there is another man, gentle and unhurried, whose particular work is with women the rest of the world has thrown away — and who will, over a breakfast table, hand me two bags of dresses to carry home, though I do not know that yet either. Hold them too. I will come back for both of them.

What I can tell you now is the shape they all share, because Simon has just spelled it out at KCC and now here it is in the flesh. None of these people is waiting to be rescued. None of them flew in from somewhere else to fix Burundi and then fly out. They are Burundians, already doing the work, already excellent at it — and the whole genius of the thing we are part of is simply to find them, and get behind them, and then have the humility to step out of the way. You begin to notice, too, how the whole web hangs together on relationships: everyone, it seems, knows Simon, or knows Gaga — our endlessly capable fixer, who appears to be connected to every good thing in the country — and door after door opens not because of money but because of trust banked over twenty-five years. It is the least Western model of charity I have ever encountered, and I have a desk job that has taught me to be cynical about all the others.

III. INSIDE THE CAGES

And then, because Burundi will not let you settle into any one feeling for long, we go to the zoo.

I have to tell you about the zoo, because it is unlike any zoo you have visited, and because the sheer tonal whiplash of that afternoon — straight out of the most heartbreaking hour of the trip, of which more in a moment, and into *this* — is so absurd that it has stayed with me as a single, unresolvable contrast. There are very few animals and almost no other visitors, and the defining feature is that you can go *inside the cages*. A keeper reaches through the bars and strokes a leopard the way you might stroke a house cat, and invites us to do the same, and then feeds her a live guinea pig, at which point I find a tactical reason to be looking elsewhere. There are crocodiles you may, if you have entirely taken leave of your sense of self-preservation, climb in and hold by the tail — which Andy and Paul and Matt promptly do, while I, whose prefrontal cortex is fully developed and fully briefed on the risks, decline with what I hope passes for dignity. There are chimps who accept our bananas and reply by flinging their own excrement, prompting a brisk and undignified retreat. There is an enormous python that gets draped across the whole team — and the rule, it is explained, is that if it is around your neck, *you* are holding it. And there is, finally, a deer, to which I am permitted to feed leaves, and which I feed leaves, because a man must know his limits, and mine are a deer.

It is ridiculous. It is also exactly the trip in miniature: a country that hands you, in a single afternoon, the thing that breaks your heart and the thing that makes you laugh until you cannot breathe, and declines, absolutely, to tell you how you are supposed to hold both at once.

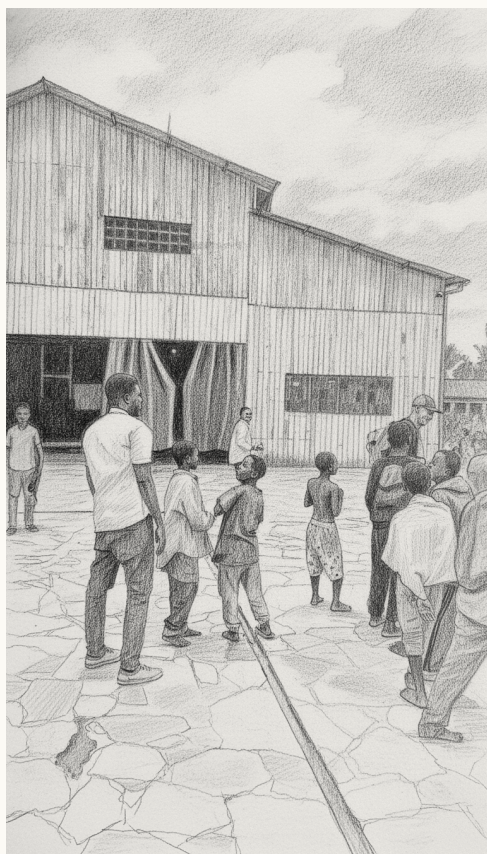
IV. THE ONE-DEGREE BICYCLE

There is, between all this, the small matter of the bicycles.

On the first afternoon we reassemble them — the moment of truth after a long flight, when you find out whether the box did its job and whether you can remember how it all goes back together. We do it in the shade, because it is already hot, with a mechanic on hand and with Tim, who turns out to know his way around a bicycle far better than I know my way around mine. And it is in this reassembly that I invisibly set my handlebars about one degree out of true — a thing I do not discover until the next day's test ride, when the bike, the moment it gets above a crawl, begins to feel profoundly, sickeningly *wrong*. I correct the bars one way; I look down; I correct them the other; and for a mile or two of downtown Bujumbura traffic — my first experience of riding in it, lorries and mopeds and that particular pucker of the close pass — I am locked in a silent war between my eyes and my hands over which way the front wheel ought to point. You cannot, it turns out, set a handlebar truly straight by feel at twenty miles an hour in city traffic — and they had genuinely been knocked a degree out; I had not imagined it. The proper fix would have to wait until I could stop, get off, and sight down the stem, which I would not manage until the turn-around later in that ride. For now I simply rode the wrongness, and tried not to think too hard about it.

I should also record, in the interests of full disclosure, that the day before the hardest physical fortnight of my life, I had a massage and went to a sauna. The sauna is the surreal part — a sauna, in Central Africa — and it is enormous and ferociously hot, and instead of the scented water of a Western spa they have simply laid eucalyptus branches across the coals, so the whole room is thick with a clean

medicinal fragrance I will smell again, a day later, pouring off the mountainsides on the climb. Next door there is a juice bar set up by an American who — naturally — knows Simon, and Annie and I throw back something the proprietor calls an immunity shot: a tiny, head-removing slug of ginger and orange and what I am fairly sure is undeclared chilli. I credit it, along with a great deal of luck, with the fact that my insides behave themselves for the entire trip, which several of my companions, by the second day, cannot say.



The barn at New Generations.

V. NEW GENERATIONS

But none of that — not the leopard, not the sauna, not the wobbling bike — is the thing I actually carry out of Bujumbura. The thing I carry is the children.

NEW GENERATIONS

The thing they tell you, before the children come in, is that these are the difficult ones.

We have walked a few hundred yards from KCC to a project called New Generations, and been given lunch, and had the work explained to us by one of the men who runs it — and the explanation comes with a warning, gently put: that these are street children of the harder sort, that some will try to take what isn't theirs, that we should mind our pockets and not be naive. It is said without a scrap of unkindness. It is simply true. The work of this place is to go out into the city and find the children who sleep in its cracks, and then to make the hardest judgement there is — which of them genuinely wants another life, and which only wants what they can get from you today — and to pour everything into the first kind, patiently, for years, on the unreasonable bet that a child the whole world has written off is in fact a gem nobody has yet bothered to clean.

We are brought into a barn. I can only call it a barn: it puts me so precisely in mind of the great show barns at Shepton Mallet, where I have spent a dozen summers at New Wine,

that for a moment I am somewhere else entirely — and then the children come in, and I am very much here.

They file in off the streets of Bujumbura, dozens of them, and I am braced for the warning to come true. It does not. What arrives instead is a tide of small hands — not reaching for pockets, but for *hands*. They want to hold yours. They want, more than anything in the world, a hug delivered side-on and the plain fact of an adult's attention turned fully upon them, which is the one thing the street does not give. We are a novelty, of course; a barnful of pale, awkward strangers is not a thing that happens here twice. But it is more than novelty. They are starved of exactly the thing it costs us nothing to hand over, and they ask for it with their whole bodies, grinning, and the warning about our pockets dies quietly somewhere under my ribs.

The youngest is four, perhaps five. He comes up to my waist. He has a gap where his front teeth will one day be, and a faded Western T-shirt advertising something he will never own, and a grin so total and so unguarded that I have to look away from it. I am not, you understand, a man much given to this sort of thing; but standing in that barn I find myself thinking thoughts I have no business thinking, doing sums that do not add up, composing in my head the conversation I would be having with Rachel if she were beside me — the one that begins *what if* and goes precisely nowhere, because it can go nowhere, because you cannot carry a child home in your luggage and you cannot mend a city one rescue at a time. It is a good job she wasn't there. We would both have been useless.

We do not stay long. We have, after all, a country to cross.

And that is where I would happily leave them — in the barn, in the noise, mid-grin — if the city had not arranged to find me again.



It is the following afternoon, on the test ride, that they come back to me.

We have ridden out through the traffic meaning to go further, but the sheer press of it has forced us to cut the planned loop short and turn for home earlier than we'd hoped — so we are halted at the turnaround, where I am taking the chance to put my handlebars right (they have been a degree out of true and nagging at me all morning), when a knot of children comes pelting up the street. For a second they are just more children, of the thousands. And then I look properly, and my stomach drops, because I *know* them. They are ours, from the barn. And there, near the front, grinning his gap-toothed grin straight at me, is the four-year-old.

It is one thing to meet a child inside a project — in a barn, fed and held and folded into something that is trying with all its strength to save him. It is another thing entirely to meet the same child a day later out here, on the actual street, in the actual life; to understand in one lurch that the barn is the exception and *this* is the rule, that when the visitors have gone and the lunch is cleared away he walks back out into precisely this. I have thought about that boy

more than almost anything else I saw in Burundi. I am thinking about him now — at my desk, in the warm, with the kettle on. As far as I know, he is still there.



Evening on the lake.

VI. THE LAST NIGHT

The evenings, both of them, end down by the lake, on a little jetty that runs out over the water, with a Primus in hand — or an Amstel, for those who have decided the local beer is an acquired taste they would rather not acquire. And it is here, on the first night, that something begins which will hold the whole fortnight together. We gather, all of us, at the end of the day, and we talk it through; and then, one or two at a time, over the evenings to come, we take it in turns to tell our own stories — why we are here, what we are carrying, what this means to us. I am not going to tell you any of those

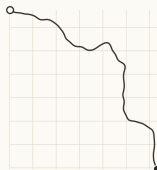
stories. They were told in confidence, around a table and later around an actual campfire, and they belong there and nowhere else. But I will tell you that they happened, and that a band of strangers became, over a fortnight of beer and exhaustion and confession, something a great deal more than the sum of its bicycles.

And then, on the second night, it is suddenly almost upon us. Tomorrow is the real thing — the day I have been quietly dreading since I drew myself that triangle in the comfort of my own study, months ago and a world away. I lie in the dark in Bujumbura and run the bargain over one more time. *If I can just get through day one.* Out there in the night, an hour or two to the south, the hill is exactly where I left it.

CHAPTER ONE

The Road to Matana

6TH OF JUNE



BUJUMBURA TO MATANA

85.5 km / 53 mi · 3,244 m / 10,643 ft climbed

I. OUT OF THE CITY

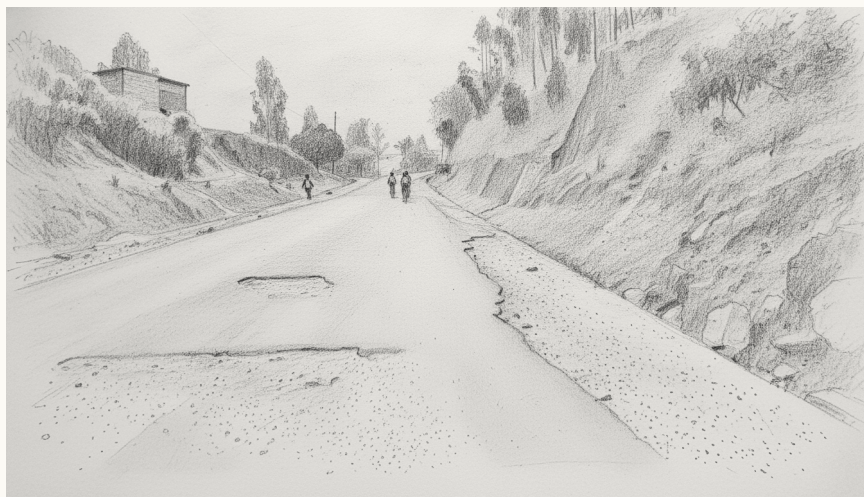
The day I have dreaded opens grey and close. It is hot already at 8 o'clock, but the cloud has knitted itself into a low lid over the hills, and for once there is not a breath of air. We have been spoiled all week by a cooling breeze off the lake; this morning the breeze has gone, and the day could go either way.

The city is Bujumbura — until recently Burundi's capital, and still its largest city, its commercial heart and its port, set at the head of Lake Tanganyika at a little over two thousand feet. It is a fine thing to start a bike ride beside water this old and this deep, though in the early miles it mostly serves as a hazard: *don't look at the lake and fall in the ditch.*

There is no gentle way out of a city on a bicycle, and certainly not this one. The first few miles are dodgy — busy, dusty, the road

surface dissolving from tarmac into unpaved track and back again, both directions of traffic fighting over a single ribbon of decent surface with broken dust on either side. It is the end of the wet season and the beginning of the dry, and the lorries throw up a fine red haze that gets into everything. *Maybe I should have brought a mountain bike after all*, I think, picking my way between cratered potholes at a sedate eight miles an hour — the surface is that broken — *though thank goodness, at least, for the thick tyres*. A trusty Toyota Hilux noses into position ahead of us — our support vehicle, our Stig van, the thing that will collect anyone who breaks down — and our photographer leans out of it to point a long lens back at the column of us. Smile. And somewhere in that column, lashed to the front of one rider's handlebars and already greying under a coat of the red dust, rides a small and entirely inexplicable soft-toy dodo. I do not, on that first roaring morning, think to ask.

Somewhere in the dust and the diesel and the honking, it lands on me properly for the first time: I cannot quite believe I am here, cycling through the middle of Africa on a Saturday morning. At home this would be the hour I set off to know the road, to clock a respectable average up familiar West Oxfordshire lanes. Instead there are children at the roadside shouting a word I keep hearing and keep mishearing — *muttundu*, I write down, then *musungu* — which is to say *white man*, or *white men*. The proper word, I learn later, is *umuzungu*; a whole roadside chorus of *abazungu*, delighted and incredulous in roughly equal measure. *What are you crazy white people doing cycling in the heat?* I imagine them asking, and I have no good answer.



Out of the city — the broken road into the dust.

II. THANK GOD FOR HAIRPINS

Then the road tips up, and the answer stops mattering, because there is only the climb.

I have been told to expect three hours of it. Three hours of ascent to look forward to, said by Simon in the bright, easy tone of a man who has climbed this hill before and means to climb it again with us today. It is, I am reliably informed, an endurance climb rather than a mountain climb — which is a distinction that means a great deal at the bottom and nothing whatsoever after the first hour. The road folds back on itself in hairpins and switchbacks, and I find myself genuinely, unironically grateful for them: *thank you, God, for the creation of hairpins*, because a hairpin is a corner, and a corner is a moment where the gradient eases and the heart, briefly, is allowed to stop hammering.

It hammers a lot. Five miles in, heart rate a hundred and sixty, and the road kicks to a solid eleven per cent. I am instinctively reaching for a lower gear that hasn't existed for half an hour. Sweat runs into my eyes and I mop at them every thirty seconds; sunglasses on and I can't see for sweat, sunglasses off and I can't see for dust. The lorries grind past in low gear, hauling their loads up the mountain, and I am reminded of what emission regulations are actually *for* — I am not used to breathing quite this much of someone else's exhaust. I seek out every scrap of shade, even at the cost of a little extra distance, and in the wind-cut sections where the road has been carved through the rock and there is suddenly no air at all, the heat focuses on you like a lens, and it is briefly horrible, and then you are out of it again.

I had thought it would go straight up. It doesn't, quite. It is gentler and more relentless than that — just enough to drive the heart rate up, then a small mercy of false-flat to let it come back down, then up again. *You can see*, I find myself musing around a thousand feet of climbing, *why nations like this are good at long-distance running*: train in the heat, train in the hills, and then go and run the flat in the cool. They are certainly fitter than I am. A local rides past me up the gradient as though it were nothing, which to him it is — he does this every day — and I am overtaken, too, by a man carrying the luggage for six cyclists.

At about an hour, on a tiny stretch of actual flat, I change up a gear for the first time in forty minutes and feel, genuinely, reborn. A breath of wind arrives like a transfusion. *You've made it up the first quarter*, I tell myself, and fill a water bottle, and pour a small private waterfall over my head. This is the day I was looking forward to and dreading in equal measure, and it is certainly hard, and I am,

against all expectation, an hour in and somehow near the front. I had not expected that. I am not one of the real players — I will discover exactly who they are later, when Simon E comes past me out of a descent like a rocket — and that is entirely fine. Today I am content to plod, guilt-free, and let the hill take as long as it takes.

III. THE HIGH COUNTRY

And here is the thing nobody quite prepares you for: it is beautiful beyond all reason.

I have seen scenery like this on the television. It is something else entirely to be inside it. The hills are steep and the foliage is enormous, and the road clings to the side of a deep ravine with a river a hundred metres below me, throwing up the roar of mini-rapids over big round stones — a sound no recording could carry home but which is with me for miles. Waterfalls come down through the trees on the far bank, stunning, one after another. Banana plants grow right up to the edge of the tarmac, and as I climb higher the air shifts and there is suddenly the clean medicinal waft of eucalyptus instead of diesel, and tea plantations begin to appear off to my left — for these are the Mugamba highlands, some of the best tea country in Burundi, the cool green roof of the nation.

What undoes me, though, is not the grand scenery but the human industry stitched into every inch of it. This is, I am told, one of the most densely populated countries in continental Africa, and looking at the terrain you cannot imagine where they all fit — and yet they have farmed every scrap of ground that will hold a crop. Not neatly terraced as you'd see in Indonesia; just planted, defiantly, straight up the raw slope of the hill, a patchwork of little micro-holdings growing a dozen different things at once. Men work a steep eroded

bank in football shirts, felling a fast-growing tree that is a bit like a willow but isn't. Another man gathers up the cut branches behind him — firewood, plainly, in a country that still cooks on wood. Somebody is firing bricks at the roadside. There is so much industry and so little of what I'd recognise as paid work — most of it, surely, subsistence — and it is, all of it, astonishing.

The road, meanwhile, supplies a procession of small miracles I will be describing to anyone who'll listen for years. A motorbike goes by carrying three towering columns of crates — beer, I think — lashed together with string, the outer two slung lower like panniers, the middle one stacked higher, the whole improbable cathedral somehow holding. A moped passes with its rider steering no-handed, helmet wedged between his knees, living his best life. A baby — no more than eighteen months old, wrapped in a sling of folded fabric — rides as the fifth person on a single motorbike, barely hanging on. A pickup comes the other way with soldiers in the back, automatic weapons across their knees. And then, descending the mountain towards me, a man on a bicycle with a full-grown dead pig draped lengthways across the saddle, one fellow at the front and one at the back to hold it on.

I cannot get over the pig. *Did you see the pig?* I ask everyone, at the next stop and the one after that. I do not know how he is holding on to the bike. I do not know how he is holding on to the *pig* — they are heavy animals — and he is navigating the ruts and the potholes and is, on top of everything, completely coated in diesel, because the lorries here have evidently never met a catalytic converter. It becomes the morning's refrain: *the pig, did anyone see the pig.*

The cloud, all this while, is a total and unearned blessing. There are moments on the switchbacks where I am wrapped in shade and

then spat back out into the warm, and I think about what this same climb would be under a hard sun, and I am fairly certain we'd be frazzled and pink by now. Instead there is a grey lid and the occasional cooling breath of wind, and on the top of one peak, a thousand metres up with not a breath of air, I stop and look. Oh, to be alive, and to be seeing this. Thank you, God.



The road tips up into the high country.

IV. THE HILL THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

The cruelty of a long climb is that it ends not with a summit but with a lie, told over and over.

We keep appearing to be near the top, and then the road finds a new wiggle and goes up a bit more. *It's got to be the top now*, I keep saying, and it keeps not being. There are, I am warned, seven short climbs still to come even after the main ascent is done, and it is these — the unexpected ones, the ones that arrive after I've men-

tally cashed in and started thinking about lunch — that hurt the most. The first long haul was almost easier, because I knew what it was: climb, climb, climb, settle in, endure. These late stings I am not braced for. My knees are starting to complain about the slow, repetitive, grinding cadence; my feet, twice now, have gone completely numb for want of blood. I keep dropping a gear and finding I am already in the lowest one, which is a small, particular, recurring insult.

And at last, the tarmac turns glorious and the road tips down, and there is a reward worth every metre of the climb: the descent. I get into the big ring and the top gear and the beauty of it, tucked right in behind Sam's wheel — you have to trust the man in front to spot the pothole, because if he doesn't we're both going in the ditch — and the wind takes every word clean out of my mouth so there's no point even trying to narrate. The countryside up here is cooler and English-feeling in the strangest way: a patch of marshy woodland that could be Suffolk, a big raptor wheeling overhead that my Cotswold brain insists on filing as a red kite for want of anything better. We have climbed, by my watch, the best part of two thousand metres — call it six and a half thousand feet — which from a starting line at two thousand feet puts us, absurdly, at something near eight thousand. I decide I don't much care that everyone's computer is reading a slightly different number. We are taking the highest one. I have earned the highest one.

By the time the mile-marker at the roadside reads eighty-two — eighty-two kilometres out of Bujumbura — I have been moving for the best part of six hours and stopped for nearly another, and my feet have gone numb again, and I am running clean out of steam, and I cannot stop grinning. *Oh, what a day. What an amazing day.*



Human industry stitched into every inch.

V. THE CHURCH ON THE LEFT

Simon has given us one last instruction for the day, and it is not a kilometre figure or a regroup point. *If you get to an English-looking church on the left-hand side, he says, then you're there.*

So I am watching the left. The bananas have well and truly kicked in — that particular wrung-out tiredness where you simply keep the pedals turning and trust your legs to know the way — and I am still watching for it when people appear in the road ahead: the support van, pulled over and waving us in. The night's stop, it turns out, sits short of the church, and the church keeps itself hidden — I will not actually lay eyes on it until the morning. But it does not matter in the least. This is Matana, and we have, against my months of quiet doubt, made it.

It is no accident that the day ends so close to this particular church. Matana is one of the first Anglican mission stations in the country,

founded in the nineteen-thirties, and it is bound up with the family of the man who has brought us all to Burundi. Simon's great-grandfather worked here; he is buried in this ground, beneath a stone that reads, in Kirundi, *imbata ya Yesu — servant of Jesus*. It was his daughter who finished the long labour of translating the Bible into Kirundi, the language those roadside children were shouting *abazungu* in this morning. And it was Simon who came back, two generations on, into a country at war, and stayed, and built the work that has now, somehow, deposited me and my secondhand Crawley road bike almost at his great-grandfather's church, with six and a half thousand feet of Burundi in my legs.

Wow, I hear myself say, when the bare shape of the story is first sketched for me at the roadside. *Can we hear that properly at some point?*

We can. But not tonight. The church, the graves, and the whole long story of *why here* can wait for the morning. Tonight there is only the enormous, foolish, grateful relief of having arrived — the day that loomed, climbed and survived; the cloud that held; the bananas, the soldiers, the singing wedding parties, the children's hands slapping mine all the way up the mountain.

VI. A PIG, A COLD ROOM, AND A CUP OF TEA

And the pig, of course. Because the very first thing to pass me as I get off the bike, as if the day were determined to round itself off in style, is a teenage boy in orange sandals carrying a piglet. A live one this time — black, with a white stripe down its nose, about the size of the boy's own torso, a length of string round its neck like a dog's lead, and entirely untroubled by any of it. I think of the other pig, the dead one slung across a bicycle on the climb this morning, and I

begin, helplessly, to laugh. You wait all day for a pig, and then two come along.

The night's lodging looks, from the road, like a pleasant rustic guest house with a little green garden; inside, it is more honest than that. The shower is a single tap protruding from the wall. There is an old white electric cooker, a sink that drips, and a cheerful patchwork bedspread under which I would rather not inspect the sheets too closely. It is, by every measure I brought with me from West Oxfordshire, distinctly shabby — and it is, tonight, the most wonderful place on earth, for the simple and complete reason that it has a roof and the roof is mine.

What I had not bargained for is the cold. You spend so long bracing for the heat of Africa that nobody thinks to mention that two thousand feet up a mountain, after dark, having just showered under a cold tap, you will be genuinely, teeth-chatteringly cold — cold enough that I put on, for the only time in the entire fortnight, my fleece, and several other layers beneath it, and am still not quite warm.

And then somebody discovers that there is a kettle.

I will not pretend to you that anything else on that enormous, terrifying, triumphant first day moved me quite as much as the cup of tea I made with that kettle. I sat with it in both hands, in the cold, in the shabby little room, in the dark of the Burundian highlands, having climbed the mountain I had spent months convinced would beat me — and it was hot, and it was tea, and it was, as far as I was concerned in that moment, absolutely everything I wanted.

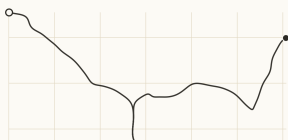


A roadside village on the long climb.

CHAPTER TWO

The Source

7TH OF JUNE (SUNDAY)



MATANA TO THE RUTANA HILLS

64.8 km / 40 mi · 1,519 m / 4,984 ft climbed

I. THE ROOT

Day two begins not with a hill but with a graveyard.

It is five minutes' ride from the hotel — barely time to decide your legs still hurt — to the red-brick church we had been told to look for the evening before, the one that looks as though it has been homesick for England since 1935. There is a service on when we arrive; it is Sunday. You can hear the singing through the walls; and I have learned this week what a kerfuffle we make up-country — half a dozen of us can stop a market or empty a school — so I stand back at the wall, keeping our distance, on behalf of all of us, the most elaborate interruption a man's Sunday sermon never quite had to suffer.

Then Simon gathers us by a grave and tells us why we are here. Not on the bikes — *here*, in this country, at all.

I had not understood it until this moment. I knew Simon as the leader of our ragged peloton, the man with the cheerfully unreliable distance estimates. I had not quite grasped that I was standing in his family's soil. In the few minutes we are off the bikes, beside the headstone, he gives us the deep history — the better part of a century of Guillebauds and Burundi — and even at that speed it knocks me sideways.

His great-grandfather, Harold, came to this mission and gave himself to the slow, painstaking, faintly impossible task of carrying the Scriptures into Kirundi — the very language those children were shouting *abazungu* in yesterday on the climb; the work his daughter would later carry all the way to a finished Kirundi Bible. He did not live to see much of it. He survived only a couple of years here before he died, and he is buried in this ground he had crossed the world to reach, beneath a stone that reads, in the language he had bent his life to, *servant of Jesus*. And Simon tells us the detail that finishes me off: that the word for *servant* on his great-grandfather's grave has since drifted, in the living, moving tongue, to also mean *duck*. A century on, the language Harold helped pin to a page has gone on without him, the way languages do, the way rivers do, and somewhere in it his epitaph has quietly picked up a second, sillier meaning. I find that almost unbearably tender — that a man could give everything to fix a language in print, and the language would thank him by staying alive enough to change.

It is very sad, standing there, to do the sum: crossed the world, buried a translation half-finished, died young and far from home. And it is the exact opposite of sad, because here is his great-grandson, who came back into this country in 1999 with the war still going, and stayed, and built the thing that has — by a chain of con-

sequences no sane person could have drawn — deposited a column of conspicuous middle-aged foreigners and their bicycles — mine the one secondhand machine among all the good ones — at a churchyard wall on a Sunday morning.

I get back on the bike not quite the same as I got off it. Today, I had been promised, is the gentle one. The graveyard was not marked on the elevation profile.



The English-looking church at Matana.

II. THE EASY DAY THAT WASN'T

I had been promised an easy day, and in the bald arithmetic of distance and height it was one: shorter than yesterday, gentler, a recovery after the great climb. It did not feel like one. This was the day my knees complained the loudest — that low, grinding ache that comes not from any single heroic effort but from turning the pedals over and over up drags that look flat and aren't. *Visually de-*

ceptive, I mutter, more than once, of a road that appears level and is quietly stealing my legs. Easy, I am learning, is a word that means much more the day after than the day of.

But the country up here is a balm. We are high now, in cool green uplands, and the landscape has changed character entirely from yesterday's banana-and-ravine drama: rolling, almost parkland, plantations of bamboo and silver-trunked trees I'm fairly sure are eucalyptus, hay cut and baled and stacked in chest-high bundles by the road, men firing bricks in the open air. It is so green and folded and tidy in places that I keep thinking of Scotland, of a tea shop that really ought to be just around the next bend. *Are we too high, up here, to farm?* — I find myself wondering, because the relentless every-square-inch cultivation of the lower slopes has given way to forestry and grass.

And there is the small, faintly shameful pleasure of the bicycles. On the long drags I keep reeling in local riders on their heavy single-speed machines — the universal Burundian workhorse, rod-braked and rust-red and usually laden — and, to my quiet delight, I find I can ease past them and pull away. I want to be honest that this is not a fair contest: I have gears, plural, and a bike built for nothing but going along, and they have one gear and, very often, a hundred-weight of cargo on the back. But there is no one out here to read out the moral context, and I am a middle-aged man a long way from home, and when I drift up alongside a young man and slip past him on a climb, some ancient and ungovernable part of me thinks, *what just happened*. It is the least defensible joy of the entire trip, and I treasured it. What strikes me too is how little else is on the road: these are the country's main arteries, the nearest thing it has to motorways, and yet for long stretches I have them almost to

myself — a bicycle, a laden moped, a family on foot, and then a long, clear nothing.



The cool green roof of the country.

III. THE SOURCE OF THE NILE

At a certain point we leave the bikes in a car park and go looking for the source of the Nile.

I should manage your expectations, because the Nile managed mine. You walk down a short flight of steps, and there it is: a pipe, dribbling into a shallow paddling-pool of a basin, which trickles into a second and then a third — and *that*, apparently, is the beginning of the longest river on earth. It is so modest it loops back round to astonishing, and so I did the only reasonable thing available to a grown man, which was to lay my hand flat across the pipe and briefly, personally, stop the Nile. There is a photograph. I am inordinately proud of it.

Back up the steps, and a short climb up a hill, stands a small pyramid — put up by a German explorer in 1938 to mark the spot — and this is where the underwhelming dribble takes on its proper weight. For centuries, finding the source of the Nile was one of the great obsessions of European exploration; men staked their lives and their reputations on it, and argued the question for decades. And here I am, a slightly knackered cyclist on a Sunday, standing at one of the disputed answers to the riddle that consumed Burton and Speke and Livingstone and Stanley. The trickle alone is nothing. To be *at the place* — the actual contested spot people once crossed continents to find — is, unexpectedly, a thrill.

Simon had promised us a guide for all this — a wizened old man, he said, who would want to talk for a good two hours and would have to be gently steered towards the short version. The wizened old man, in the event, is nowhere to be found, and so Simon appoints himself, and gives us his own cheerful, approximate tour of the source of the Nile, complete with a freehand translation of the plaque that I suspect owes rather more to enthusiasm than to scholarship. Andy, meanwhile — the oldest of our number and, by a distance, the youngest at heart — settles the question of what a grown man does with a monument by taking off his shoes and scrambling up the little pyramid to perch astride its very apex, king of the castle, while the rest of us gather the photographic evidence.

Then you turn round. Because the most astounding thing up there is not the monument or the pipe but the view they sit in: the whole green sweep of the highlands falling away on every side, ridge behind ridge into the haze — the roof of a continent. And there is a thought that arrives with the view. You are standing, more or less, on one of the great dividing lines of Africa — the long watershed

that separates the basin of the Nile from the basin of the Congo. A raindrop that falls on this side of it sets out, by the Nile, on the longest journey water can make on the continent, and arrives, four thousand miles and several months later, in the Mediterranean. A raindrop that falls on the far side goes the other way entirely, down into the Congo, and comes out in the Atlantic. The same cloud; two seas. A great river has to begin somewhere; it might as well be this ordinary, breathtaking hill.

There are hot springs nearby, too, and — having all but promised to spare you the details — I find I cannot. We get there the local way, which is to say thirteen of us folded into the back of a single Toyota Hilux, hammering down an off-road track; and I learn, within the first hundred yards, the one piece of wisdom no guidebook thinks to offer, which is that after a day on a bicycle saddle you do not want to *sit* on anything whatsoever, least of all the ribbed steel floor of a bouncing pickup. I spend most of the journey perched, with what dignity I can muster, on the feet of Jean Lobiko, our long-suffering photographer.

The springs themselves are a genuine surprise — properly hot, far hotter than I had braced for, and busy with local people who have, by long custom, divided the water into a men's side and a women's side, which we are careful to observe. Simon had been building the place up for days. What he had not foreseen was the floor show. A dozen pale strangers stripping down to their cycling shorts is, in itself, a certain kind of entertainment for the regulars; but the house comes down properly when Matt, lowering himself in, loses his footing and performs a full, flat, magnificent belly-flop into the shallows in front of the entire assembled company — which turns out to be

the finest icebreaker imaginable, because now everyone, on both sides of the water, is laughing at exactly the same thing.

Simon speaks the language, and the banter begins to flow, and at some point he gravely informs the locals that Sam — who is the strongest and fittest of us, and boxes — would be delighted to take any of them on. It is said entirely in jest. The locals consider this; confer among themselves; and then, grinning, point as one to a quiet, enormous man sitting in the corner, at which Sam's face does something complicated and he says, to general and bilateral delight, "...*where exactly is this going?*" Nobody, I am pleased to report, fights anybody. We slither out, change, and fold ourselves back into the Hilux — and on the way home I claim the prize position, standing up behind the cab with the wind full in my face, twenty or thirty miles an hour down a dust road through villages in the middle of nowhere, the risk-assessing department of my brain filing a strongly worded objection that the rest of me cheerfully overrules. Not, as I noted at the time, your average Sunday.



The road almost to ourselves.

IV. LOST

The day's one real fright came later, and it came, the way these things do, from going well.

The group had strung right out by then, and I was near the back of it — second to last, but with a long gap to the one rider still somewhere behind me — riding hard, alone, trying to close on the others up ahead. And at perhaps twenty-five miles an hour on a downhill I sailed straight past a turning I never saw. There was a bus pulling in just where the junction was, and it hid the road, and on I went, fast and oblivious, on entirely the wrong course.

I got maybe half a mile before anything happened, though it felt like a great deal more — downhill miles go quickly, and quickly is precisely the problem. Behind me, locals who must have watched the rest of the group peel off the other way came out and flagged me down, beeping, calling. And here is the part I'm not proud of: my

first instinct was suspicion. How could they possibly know where I was meant to be going? Were they having me on? It took me a shamefully long moment to understand that they were simply being kind.

Because in those few seconds, stopped on a strange road in the middle of Burundi, I had begun to do the maths, and the maths was not comforting. There was a support minibus — but it shadowed the *last* rider, and I was not the last rider; the straggler it followed was somewhere back down the road, out of sight behind me. I had been alone in the gap, chasing a group ahead who could not see me either. Had I peeled miles off the route, the bus would simply have carried on shadowing the straggler down the correct road, the others would have assumed I was coming, and nobody — nobody at all — would have known I'd gone. At some point I'd have had to decide, alone, with no map, no language, and a phone with no local data and so no real way to raise the team, that I was wrong — and turn back, and hope turning back was right. Without noticing it, I had cycled to the very edge of being properly lost, and what reached out and pulled me back from that edge was nothing more than the kindness of strangers who owed me precisely nothing.

In the end it cost me a jolt and a doubling-back, and no more. I rejoined the route, found the others, and rode on into the afternoon a little more aware of how thin the margin is, out here, between an adventure and an incident — and how often, on this trip, the thing that kept me the right side of it was simply a Burundian deciding to help. The day ran out where the tarmac did: a degraded red road with, improbably, a faded white line still painted down the middle of it, as though someone had once had ambitions for the place. We rolled into the night's stop tired, knees grumbling, and ready —

though we did not yet know it — for one of the happiest evenings of the whole fortnight.

V. WATERFALLS, AND A COURTYARD

The night's stop is a friendly, ramshackle place built around a courtyard, and the first order of business, for a group two days into a fortnight with a single small rucksack apiece, is laundry. We stand at the taps and hand-wash our cycling kit and string it up to dry across the courtyard in the warm evening air; and I notice, in a corner of the grounds, a vegetable plot, and growing in it — improbably, gloriously — a stand of pineapples, which is the moment it properly lands on me that I am a very long way indeed from the lanes of West Oxfordshire.

There is food, too, as there will be every night from here: proper, vast, restoring food, conjured out of next to nothing by Cedric, our own cook, who goes on ahead each day and somehow has a feast waiting by the time we fall off our bikes. It becomes one of the small liturgies of the fortnight — at some point in every meal Simon calls for three cheers for Cedric, and we give them, hoarse and entirely sincere, because the man is performing a daily miracle and we know it.

But the evening's real extravagance is the waterfalls. We pile into a minibus and are driven down to a whole staircase of them, five or six, the largest big enough to carry a footbridge across the lip so you can stand and look down into the roar. We climb to the very bottom and pick our way out over the slick black rocks to get underneath — the water comes down not sheer but at an angle, bouncing, so that it lands on you with a real and shocking force — and for a quarter of an hour a band of tired, creaking, middle-aged cyclists turn back

into children, shrieking and slipping and hauling one another upright, half-drowned and helpless with laughter under a column of freezing water. Jonny loses an earring to it and does not notice for an hour. I spend the entire time in a quiet panic about my wedding ring. And Jean Lobiko — who has pointed a long lens at us all day without a word of complaint — now runs the whole way back up to the top of the falls to get the shot looking down on the lot of us, and gets it, naturally, because he always does.

The gentleness, of course, only revealed itself the following morning, when the third day made the second look like a lie-in. But that is tomorrow's problem. Tonight there is a courtyard hung with our drying lycra, a plate of Cedric's best inside me, and the particular, bone-deep tiredness that is entirely content with itself.



Folded green valley, toward Rutana.

CHAPTER THREE

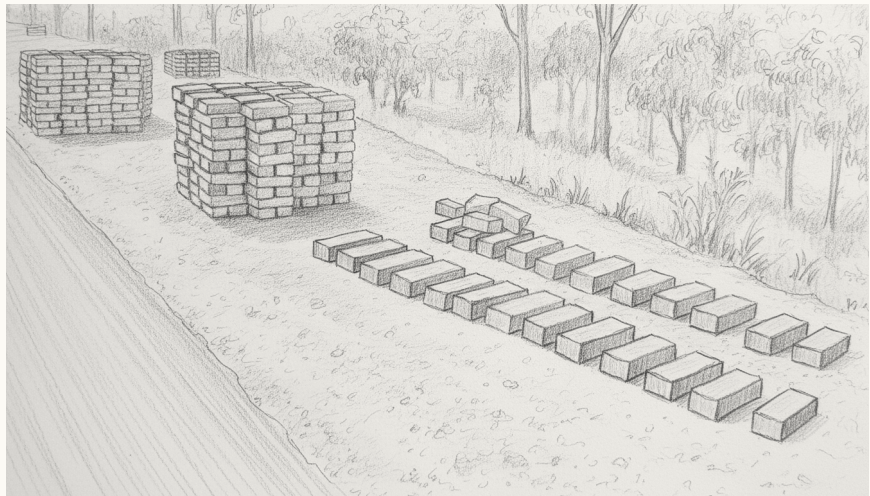
Carried

8TH OF JUNE



THE RUTANA HILLS TO RUYIGI

69 km / 43 mi · 2,376 m / 7,795 ft climbed



Brick-kilns smoking at the roadside.

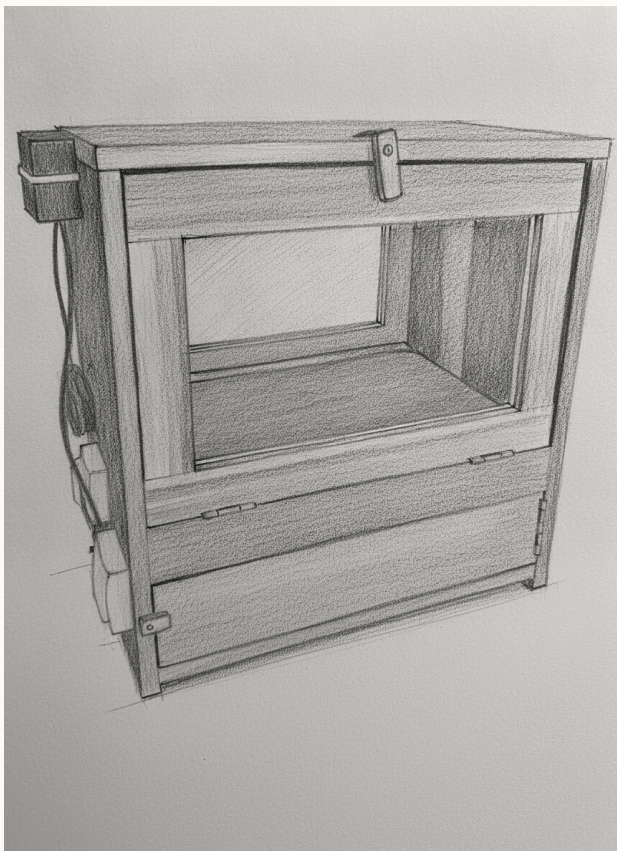
I. A BAD START

The third day does not begin well. There is a puncture before we have properly started, and then another, and then an outright blowout, and by the time the tubes are changed I am a quarter of an hour down on the main group, riding in a small chasing pack with Tim, Jonny and Simon E, playing catch-up before the day has even warmed up.

The tarmac, when it comes, is crisp and good, and there are long fast stretches that almost persuade you the day will be kind — brick-kilns smoking at the roadside, charcoal fires, banana plants, and a church in almost every village — not the hamlets, perhaps, but every settlement of any size. It is a deeply churchgoing country.



Kibuye Hope Hospital.



A homemade incubator — eucalyptus and lightbulbs.

II. KIBUYE HOPE HOSPITAL — THE CHOSEN ONES

KIBUYE HOPE HOSPITAL

Two of our bikes limp into Kibuye barely alive.

Jonny's rear wheel has picked up a dent so vicious it keeps pinching the tube flat — a puncture every few miles — and

Paul has bent a tooth clean off his big chainring. It has been that kind of morning: a blowout before we'd properly started, a quarter-hour lost, climbs that didn't care. And so, while the rest of us are walked into one of the more remarkable places I have ever stood, Tim and Simon E disappear into a little workshop the hospital keeps and spend the entire visit bent over two broken bicycles — coaxing a dented rim back into true and a chainring back into mesh — so that two of their friends can ride the rest of the week. They will not see a single ward. I want that on the record: that some of the best of what happened at Kibuye happened in a shed, done by people who gave up the tour to keep the team whole.

We had reached the place itself only by turning off the good tarmac onto the thick end of a kilometre of rough dirt track, picking our way up to it — the sort of surface that, on our skinny-barred road bikes, demanded a careful, low-gearred respect.

The rest of us are met by one of those who built the modern hospital, and by an American doctor — Dr Alyssa Pfister, a paediatrician — who first, with tremendous practicality, lets a dozen sweaty cyclists use her bathroom, and then walks us out of the quiet residential strip and into the hospital proper, and around the wards, telling us each one as we stand in it.

I will not catalogue it all. The detail everyone remembers — the one there is, mercifully, a photograph of — is the incubators. They are homemade. Somewhere in this country it was worked out that a commercial incubator costs a thou-

sand dollars and more that nobody here has, and that a box of local eucalyptus, warmed by ordinary lightbulbs under a thermostat, costs about a hundred and keeps a premature baby just as alive. I stand and look at one and feel something I can only call the joy of pure common sense — the particular beauty of a cheap, clever, kind answer to an impossible question. It is, somehow, one of the most hopeful objects I have ever seen.

But the thing that goes deepest at Kibuye is not the cleverness; it is the arithmetic of who is standing in front of me. Dr Alyssa is American. She came here in 2013, when this was a small, remote, hundred-bed outpost, and she has poured a dozen years of her one life into it since. I do not need to spell out the other life that was on offer — the comfortable, well-paid, safe one most of us would have taken and called it sensible. She chose, instead, the danger and the hard work and the daily frustration of a hospital in a country the world had written off. I have a free health service waiting for me at home that I have done nothing to earn and routinely fail to be grateful for; and I stand here at the other end of the spectrum entirely, in her ward, and find that her choice undoes me more thoroughly than any statistic could.

Before we leave, the guide asks us — gently — that when we take our photographs, we capture *the beautiful Burundi more than the brutal, broken part*. I have thought about that sentence more than almost anything else anyone said to me on the whole trip. It is not a request to look away from the hard things: Kibuye is full of hard things and hides none of

them. It is a request about where to leave the reader's eye. And it is, in the end, the only real instruction this whole account has — that you should come away from it carrying the beauty.

We collect Jonny and Paul and their resurrected bicycles from the shed, and we ride on.



A laden bicycle on the long climb.

III. THE AFTERNOON, AND THE BUSINESS OF BEING CARRIED

Then the morning's grace gives way to the afternoon's furnace.

By the time we leave the hospital it is simply, unkindly hot, with a headwind that has decided to make a full day of it and almost no cloud to take the edge off. The first day had been a known quantity — one enormous climb, and I had braced for it. This is different,

and, I find, harder on the mind. The hills here are not vast, but they are constant and unannounced: you crest one certain it must be the last, and there is another, and another, and with no profile to count them down you do not know when it ends. That, it turns out, is the thing that breaks me. Not the gradient. The not knowing.

Somewhere in the worst of it, Jonny appears at my shoulder. Jonny is about thirty, one of the youngest and fittest of us, a man who could have been a mile up the road with the quick group and has instead, for no reason but kindness, dropped back to haul a wilting middle-aged semi-stranger through the heat. I have got myself into a genuine hole — far too hot, and, in the way of a man too busy suffering to be sensible, with nowhere near enough food or water in me — and Jonny takes one look and essentially forces a couple of energy gels on me. The effect is almost embarrassing in its speed: within minutes the legs come back, the fog lifts, the world rearranges itself into somewhere a person might actually survive. He sets a pace I can just about hold and talks me from one scrap of shade to the next, and when we finally fall into the checkpoint I get off the bike and say the only true thing there is to say: *that man needs a gold medal. He effectively carried me.* I am not being modest. I would not have ridden that stretch, in that state, on my own.

And here is the part I had not expected, and have decided not to hide. At the checkpoint, in the shade, asked how I was doing, I found I could not quite keep myself together. I was overheated and hollowed-out and the feelings had risen far closer to the surface than a man my age generally permits — and when I looked up, I saw I was not alone in it. There was a whole small band of us, grown adults with responsible jobs and mortgages, standing in the shade of a Burundian afternoon, unmistakably *emotional*. "I'm cer-

tainly in that one," I admitted, and we half-laughed at ourselves, and it was, in its odd way, one of the loveliest moments of the fortnight — the discovery that coming undone out here was nothing to be ashamed of, and that everyone else was a little undone too.

But the thing I keep turning over, weeks later, is smaller and more personal than that. I have done all my training alone. I am a self-contained sort of man; I like to cope; I do not, by long and stubborn habit, ask for help. And what day three did, in the end, was take that habit away from me by force. *It's tough, needing help*, I said on that road, half to myself. *Fortunately Jonny was offering, and I wasn't stupid enough to refuse. I need to get better at asking.* That may be the truest sentence I recorded in the whole of Burundi. It took a country, a furnace of an afternoon, and a thirty-year-old's back wheel to teach a grown man what he should have learned decades earlier: that you are allowed to need people, and that letting yourself be carried is not a defeat but a sort of gift — to the one carrying as much as to the one carried.

IV. CHARLES — THE BANANA GROVE

CHARLES

The thief is in the bananas again.

He crouches at the far edge of what was once his father's land, working a stem loose in the failing light, and the man watching him from the treeline is armed.

He knows this thief. Everyone on the hill knows him. He is one of the men who killed the watching man's mother and

father — killed them at home, in 1993, while their son was on the other side of the world, in Toronto, running the indoor championship of his life, where the call reached him that they were dead, and where, God knows how, he ran anyway, and stood on the podium for them. He had flown home to a grave. He had gone away again and run another season, because what else does a runner do. And now he is back — on a visit, with an army escort and a gun on him — and here, by some unbearable arithmetic, is one of the men who did it, stealing fruit in the dusk.

The man is within reach. No one out here, in the failing light, would ever think to ask a question. By his own account, he is seconds from it.

And a voice says, very clearly: *do not shed blood*.

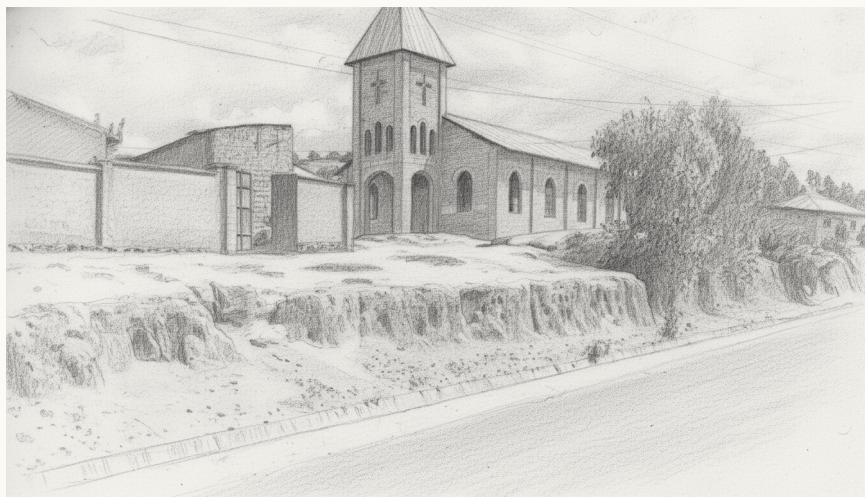
He thinks he has imagined it.

Do not shed blood.

— and that is where I have to leave him, because this is not where I met him.

Where I met him was outside the Kings Conference Centre in Bujumbura, three days before our wheels turned, where a group of us had sat to hear his story: a lean, courteous man who, when he shook my hand, I'd have filed under *parish priest* long before *athlete*, and who had begun almost shyly, by telling us he used to run a bit. He had not led with the grove. I had no idea, as he spoke, that this was a man who had once stood among his own family's banana plants,

armed, with a dead mother and a dead father and every reason in the world.



A brick church in a roadside village.

V. RUYIGI

The rest of it was simply endurance — *just focusing on the finish line, or the bit before the finish line, or the brow of this hill, or the next rotation* — breaking the impossible afternoon into pieces small enough to swallow. When the stopping point finally showed itself at the foot of a hill, I heard myself say, with total sincerity, *praise God from whom all blessings flow*. We rolled into Ruyigi emptied out — and I rolled in carried, which I was, slowly, learning to let myself be.

VI. TEKANA

And then, as if to make amends for the day it had just put me through, Burundi handed me the loveliest evening of the entire trip.

The night's stop is a place called Tekana Retreat, run by a woman named Jocelyn, and it is so new that we are its first-ever guests: immaculate, airy, spotless, a few corners still unfinished because they had been racing to have it ready for us, and over all of it an air of such deep calm that the same word keeps going round the group like a password — *tranquil*. *This is a tranquil place*. I am sharing what amounts to a small suite with Sam: in through the front door, a bathroom on the left, then my bedroom — and then, through a door at the back of it, Sam's, which he can reach only by padding past the foot of my bed, an arrangement we agree is character-building.

While most of the group heads off to find the town and a drink, a few of us stay behind, and Jocelyn gives those of us who have stayed a quiet tour of what she has built — her gardens, her herbs, her patient campaign towards growing as much of her own food as she can — and tells us what she means it all to be: a refuge, and a kind of school, somewhere the city's children might come to learn how things grow and to remember the land their tarmac-raised generation is already forgetting. And then she tells us the thing about herself that I will turn over for the rest of the trip. She is Burundian, and she was educated abroad; and almost everyone handed that particular escape from a country this poor takes it and does not come back — the ablest, the most promising, gone to Europe or America or Canada, lost to the place that raised them. Jocelyn came back. She came back, and built this. There is, I am beginning to realise, a whole quiet army of people here who made exactly that

unreasonable choice, and this entire trip is, in a sense, a tour of them.

And then, in the cold that comes down hard the moment the sun has gone — for we are high here, high enough that the nights carry an edge nobody ever thinks to warn you about — Jocelyn's people build us a fire. We sit around it under a sky absolutely furred with stars, and we talk, and one or two of us tell their stories, and those stay around that fire, where they belong. What I can tell you is only this: that the day that had broken me, the day I'd had to be carried through, ended around a fire, under all those stars, warm at last, among people who had been strangers a week before and were, I realised, not strangers any more.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Empty Quarter

9TH OF JUNE



RUYIGI TO MUYINGA

110.7 km / 69 mi · 3,019 m / 9,905 ft climbed



A house on the high plateau.

I. THE LONGEST DAY

Day four is the longest — a hundred and eleven kilometres, the timetable says, which is the sort of number you try not to look at directly — and it is also, of the whole fortnight, the exact middle: the pivot, the point from which there is precisely as much behind you as ahead. I set out, if I'm honest, in what I called at the time the *not-enjoying-it-at-all* category. The day before had taken something out of me that hadn't yet come back — not the legs so much as the spirit, the residue of having buckled in the heat and been carried home — and now here was the longest day of all, sitting in front of me like a wall. I was, in a quiet way, running away from yesterday.

So the advice I was given early, and kindly, was exactly the advice I needed: take it like a marathon, not a race; small steps; don't push. *That's what I've been trying to tell myself*, I muttered. Today I would not chase and I would not race; I would ride my own pace, keep the heart rate down, and let the long day come to me. Not that the plan survived contact with the morning. I had meant to get away early, near the front of the pack, and ride my own quiet race; instead I found myself, almost at once, back in catch-up mode. Jonny was feeling off himself that day — and yet, in what may be the single most deflating fact of the whole trip, even an off-colour Jonny, half my age, was still going well enough that I had to push to stay anywhere near him.



The empty quarter — long, clear road.

II. THE EMPTY QUARTER

And the long day, when it came, was strangely, gloriously empty.

This is the far east of the country, out towards the Tanzanian border, and the land opens and empties, the hills rolling away in long slow waves — a Burundian sine-wave, down and up and down and up — under a sky doing its level best impression of a perfect English summer. The roads out here are superb, smooth ribbons of new tarmac laid, I'm told, by the Chinese; and so, sailing along yet another flawless surface in the middle of Africa, I find myself thinking *well done, Chinese team*, because credit where it's due. I take to navigating by the little roadside stones — RN13, PK65, PK66 — ticking them off one by one, the way you count anything when the whole is too big to hold in your head.

The children make it bearable, as they always do, pouring out of the houses and the schoolyards to wave and cheer and run alongside,

delighted by the spectacle of, as I put it, this weird white guy in a yellow top. And I keep being ambushed by how like home it all looks: a craggy bit that could be Scotland, a green fold that's pure Yorkshire, a stand of bracken that drops me straight into the Peak District — until a woman walks past with a full load balanced on her head and a baby asleep on her back, and the illusion dissolves. There is a lot of time, on a day like this, to contemplate the sheer improbability of my being here at all: an almost-fifty-year-old who sits at a desk for a living, somehow turning pedals across the middle of Africa, a very long way out of his natural habitat.

What you notice most, in the end, is the emptiness. These are the main roads of the country and they carry almost nothing — a laden bicycle, the odd moped, long clear stretches of nobody. Some of it is fuel: there has been a fuel shortage here for a long time, and you pass the marks of it — motorbikes queuing at a dry-looking station, a system of apps and word-of-mouth that tells you where the next delivery might land, a wait that can run to most of a day for a few litres. And once, coming the other way, a cluster of soldiers in the back of a pickup — more automatic weapons than I have ever seen in one place, not one of them smiling — and a small plane low behind them; and I will admit I pedalled on wondering, mildly, whether this was a routine sort of outing or something I'd rather not be near. Then the road bent, and they were gone, and the children came running out again, and the day went on.



Open country in the reserve.

III. FLIGHT

The middle of the day tips us down into a national park, which hands us two things: a running joke and the fastest descent of the trip.

The joke is quickly told. Simon had assured me, with a perfectly straight face, that I might see a tiger — and since there are no tigers in Africa, and both of us knew there are no tigers in Africa, nobody was fooled for a second, least of all me. The only honest naturalist's report I could file was that the sole mammals in the whole reserve appeared to be the MAMILs — the middle-aged men in lycra; a description I met exactly halfway, being middle-aged but, alone among us, not in any lycra at all. Burundi is, sadly, short on big game now: too many people and too little room, and the wildlife has largely gone. A nature reserve with not much nature left in it — even the baboons I'd half-hoped for never broke cover.

What it did have was the descent, and that was the real gift — a long, steep, beautifully surfaced road falling away for miles. Because it was a reserve there was even less traffic than usual, which is to say almost none, so we had the whole width of the tarmac to play with, and I let it run. My one regret is that my foot popped clean out of the pedal right at the top, just as I was winding up to put the power down and already gathering pace — a brief, undignified wobble as the quick men came flying past — which surely cost me a few miles an hour off the top. Even so, I touched forty-eight, comfortably the fastest I have ever travelled on a bicycle in my life. Speed-boy Simon E, who lives for precisely this, sailed past the lot of us and clocked something north of sixty.

And the strange thing is that it did not feel fast. With the whole empty road to use, good tarmac under the wheels, and nothing at all coming the other way, forty-eight miles an hour felt less like danger than like flight — the heat and the kilometres gone for a few glorious minutes, just the falling road, the warm air, and the daft grinning joy of it. Mad dogs and Englishmen, I thought; we were out in the midday sun, and what few baboons there were had the good sense not to be.

IV. CHARLES — "THE RUNNER"

CHARLES

Somewhere on the long, hot, empty road to Muyinga — I will not pretend I know which kilometre, because by then

the kilometres had stopped being numbers and become weather — the rest of it comes back to me.

He did not shoot.

He told it plainly, the group of us sitting around him outside the conference centre, in the flat tone people save for the things that have cost them the most. The voice said *do not shed blood*; he lowered the gun; he let the man walk off into the dusk with his stolen bananas; and that was that. There was no swelling music. He did not, in that moment, become anything you could put a word to. He simply did not do the thing that every cell in him had the right to do.

What undoes me is the order of it. Burundi wears its faith the way Britain used to — a country so blanketed in church that almost everyone has the Gospel by heart and almost no one has been asked to do anything difficult with it. Charles had grown up inside that cultural Christianity; he knew exactly what the voice in the grove was asking. What he did not yet have was the thing it would take him the better part of two decades to give in full — himself. So the forgiveness came first, on nothing but raw obedience, with his parents barely in the ground; the wholehearted commitment came years later, a long, slow walk behind it. He is the fastest man I have ever shaken hands with — an African champion, a world silver medallist, a 1:44 half-miler — and the slowest, most deliberate work of his life was putting the rifle down and keeping it down.

His name is Charles Nkazamyampi, and in Burundi he is famous; he runs a foundation now that takes what he

learned and gives it to the young — sport as the hook, and underneath it the unreasonable, country-saving proposition that the cycle can be broken: that you need not, in the end, do the thing you have every right to do.

I thought about this on the bike, which is a ridiculous place to think about it. I was tired and hot, a hundred-odd kilometres into the longest day of the trip, with a warm, righteous sense of my own endurance, and ahead of me was a town I had never heard of, and behind me, three days back and a lifetime away, a man who had stood among his own dead and chosen mercy — and I found I had very little left to complain about.

V. MUYINGA

The sting in the tail of the longest day is that Muyinga sits on a hill, and to reach it you must first give up all your height into a valley and then climb the whole lot back, in the late heat, on whatever you have left — which, in my case, was not a great deal. The big towns up here nearly all sit on hilltops; you build on a hill, I was told, because what you build in a valley sooner or later floods. We had been warned about this one, and warned, too, that most years a handful of riders — two, three, four — simply load the bike onto the bus for it and take the lift to the top. I will be honest and tell you I considered it. I was tired enough that the thought arrived not as temptation but as plain arithmetic. And then I made the only decision I could live with: that I would at least *start* the thing, and if the hill beat me I could always get the bus anyway.

I could see the town for miles, a smudge on a far ridge that never seemed to come any closer. I set off behind Paul and watched him ride gently away from me, and then it was just me and the gradient. I zig-zagged — there was so little traffic that I could use the whole width of the road, tacking across it like a boat working into wind, stealing a degree or two off the slope — and I inched upward. And this time, with the day before fresh and shaming in my mind, I did the one thing I had failed to do in the furnace: the moment I felt the heat begin to climb in me again, I stopped, in the shade, and let my heart rate come down, and drank, and only *then* went on. It is not much of a lesson. It is the most basic lesson there is. But I had paid full price for it twenty-four hours earlier, and here I was spending it, and it worked — I rode the rest of that hill out under my own steam. I honestly hadn't known if I'd make it; and the sweetest part, at the top, was learning that every last one of us had, and that nobody, in the end, had taken the bus. I was very glad I hadn't.

What nobody warns you about that climb is that it has a second act. You crest it onto a roundabout, turn right, fully expecting the town — and the road simply goes on climbing. Gentler now, almost kindly by comparison, but on and on, declining to end, until at last the hotel resolved out of the haze and the day was, mercifully, done. We had come in as the headscarves grew more frequent around us — we were close to the Tanzanian border now, and the country was changing — and I got off the bike at the end of a hundred and eleven kilometres, hollowed out and oddly content, having crossed the whole long middle of the trip on an empty tank and a borrowed kindness or two.

The night's lodging was a great busy barracks of a place after a week of small country guest houses — bigger, busier, more lived-in

than anywhere else we stayed, and somebody took one look and christened it Butlins, and the name stuck. Cedric, naturally, had got there ahead of us, and produced a sticky beef and carrots and the inevitable, glorious mountain of chips, with white rice and peas besides; and an Amstel Bright, at the end of a day like that one, went down like a sacrament. *All downhill from here*, I told myself, knowing perfectly well it wasn't.

It was a Butlins by night as well. Somewhere below, a sound system started up and gave no sign of ever stopping; the walls were thin, the room was hot — none of them had air conditioning, and I dared not open the window more than a crack for fear of what the dark would send in — and I lay there, for the first time all trip, in earplugs. The music gave up around half past ten; the talking did not, the way it never does outside a bar, and the hum of it ran on into the small hours. It was, by a distance, my worst night's sleep of the fortnight.

And it was here — flat on a hot bed in a noisy room, and not out in the heat of the afternoon — that I reached the lowest point of the whole trip. Which makes very little sense on paper. The riding had gone *better* than the day before; there had been something in the tank after all; the body, against all expectation, was mending. But the body is not the whole of a person. Three and four days of riding had stacked up underneath me, the lost sleep on top of that, the heat, and another long day already waiting in the morning — and the sum of it, somewhere around midnight in Muyinga, was a man quietly at the end of himself. What got me to morning was nothing in that room. It was the messages from home, read off a phone in the dark — ordinary words from the people I had left behind, reach-

ing all that way — and they were just enough. I have seldom been so grateful for so little.



New tarmac, and a rare speed sign.

CHAPTER FIVE

Workhorses

10TH OF JUNE



MUYINGA TO NGOZI

77.1 km / 48 mi · 2,075 m / 6,808 ft climbed



A labouring lorry on the way out of town.

I. THE NEW NORMAL

Day five was the only day of the week that offered a choice. You could ride the standard route to Ngozi, or take a longer version — a detour that looped out and back, another thirty or forty kilometres on top — and right from the beginning, months before, I had privately meant to do the long one. Then came day three, and the heat, and the hard lesson it taught me about the edges of my own endurance, and the question more or less answered itself: I would ride the short route, and not waste a moment pretending otherwise. After a week of hard calls, it was a wonderfully easy one.

So we set off as the short group — five of us, who spent a fair amount of energy that morning trying *not* to be known as the slow group: Matt, Andy, Kath, Anthony and me. And the gift of it, the thing I hadn't seen coming, was the sheer lifting of pressure. The long-route riders had miles to make and a clock to chase; we had neither, and could set our own pace, stop where we pleased, and never once dread being the one holding everyone up. After four days of catching up, it felt like being let off the leash.

It begins in chaos, all the same, and the strange thing is how normal the chaos has come to feel.

We set off straight into the heavy traffic of a busy town, and within minutes Kath and I are separated from the rest — stuck behind a labouring lorry, a big trailered thing belching diesel and blotting out the potholes just when we most needed to see them, on a road I would not have chosen to thread a bike through. It is the sort of riding that, a week ago, would have had my heart in my mouth. It still does, a little; there is a particular pucker that comes with a lorry's wing-mirror passing close enough to read. But somewhere in

the last few days the terror has downgraded itself into something more like weather — a thing that is happening, that you manage, that you no longer quite expect to kill you. A mix, I suppose, of genuinely hairy and the new normal. You adapt faster than you would believe.

There is a thing I have come to love about these towns, too, and it is the precise moment you leave them. Inside the town, in the press of traffic and commerce, nobody pays a passing cyclist the slightest attention — you are just one more obstacle, and there is a cool, almost metropolitan indifference to it that I find oddly restful. Then you cross some invisible line a kilometre out, and the spell breaks: you are a novelty again, a spectacle, and the children come racing down to the verge, waving and shouting, and you go from anonymous to astonishing in the space of a few hundred yards.



The bicycle as workhorse.



Children carrying the day's water.

II. WORKHORSES

But the thing I cannot stop watching, on day five, is the bicycles. Not ours. Theirs.

The hills are full of boys pushing bikes. Not riding them — *pushing* them, on foot, because what is loaded on them is far too heavy to pedal: great towers of those yellow plastic jerrycans, four and five to a bike, brimming with water, hauled up gradients that have me in my lowest gear and gasping. They are teenagers, most of them, doing it in flip-flops, leaning into the load with a patient, head-down economy of effort, and they will do it again tomorrow, and the day after that.

And it rearranges, a little, how I see my own presence here. For me, and for the rest of our lycra-clad column strung out across these hills, the bicycle is essentially a toy — an instrument of leisure, of challenge, of a charitable adventure we flew several thousand miles

to undertake and will fly home from. For the boy with the water, the bicycle is none of those things. It is a tool — the central tool — of staying alive: the thing that moves the water, the charcoal, the bananas, the crates of beer, the impossible loads, from where they are to where they are needed, in a country with few cars and less fuel. This is not his hobby. It is his job, and his father's job, and most days look exactly like this one. I am playing at the thing these hills do for a living, and the distance between those two facts is a humbling one to pedal through.

THE DRESSES

There is one thing I am bringing home from Burundi that I did not make and do not own: two bags of dresses.

They did not come round the country with me. Before we set off, we each packed a small rucksack — a couple of changes of clothes, the bare minimum — and left everything else behind at the hotel in Bujumbura; and so the dresses spent the whole ride folded in my room there, going nowhere, while the rest of us went round the entire country. They were made here, in this city, by women I want to tell you about, and I am only the courier carrying them the last leg, home to England — the smallest imaginable part to play in their story, and the part I happened to be handed.

The swap was done over breakfast before the ride: I gave Ephraim a parcel of needles and thread and small supplies I'd carried out from home, and he gave me two bags of fin-

ished dresses to carry back the other way. Both ends of that exchange run through a woman called Maria — someone from my own church, near home in West Oxfordshire, whom I barely knew before all this (I know her husband rather better) — who helps supply the makings at one end and sells the dresses at the other, through a small online shop. A courier, basically: the least skilled link in a long and remarkable chain.

The chain is a ministry called Together for Development — *Birashoboka*, which means *it is possible* — and the women at the end of it are the ones most people have written off entirely: women who have been in prostitution, women living with HIV, widows, single mothers in the refugee camps. Ephraim's people teach them to sew. Not as therapy — as a trade: a cooperative, an income, a way out that doesn't depend on anyone's charity carrying on forever. Those two bags are the proof of it. Somebody learned to make these with her own hands; they are good; and when they sell, the worth of them comes back to the women who made them.

I think about those two bags more than once on the ride, even though they are sitting in a hotel room a hundred miles away. One of the women, Ephraim's people say, put it about as plainly as it can be put: *thanks to this, I can afford to live. I can buy toothpaste for my family*. That is the whole of it, really — not a grand transformation, just toothpaste, just the ordinary dignity of being able to provide, handed back to someone who'd been told she was beyond saving. And here is the detail I keep returning to: that the thing these women make, to climb out of the very worst that can

happen to a person, is *dresses* — beautiful things. They sew their way back to dignity, in colour.

As I write this, those two bags are still in a drawer in my house; I have not yet managed to hand them on. Soon I'll give them to Maria, and she'll sell them through her shop, and a little more of someone's dignity in Bujumbura will pay for itself. Carrying them this far was the least I could do.



The avenue of evergreens, and its shade.

III. THE PLEASURES OF THE DAY

For all that, day five is a kinder day to ride than most. It is hillier than the long flats of the east — up and down, up and down, which suits me far better than a relentless drag — and there are descents that genuinely sing, the little computer nudging into the forties, the

road for once smooth and clear beneath me. At one point I pass a long avenue of evergreens that someone has planted down both sides of the road, throwing a cool ribbon of shade across the tarmac, and I am so absurdly grateful for it that I resolve, then and there, to track down whoever planted those trees and give them a hug. A wide plain opens up that looks as though it really ought to hold herds of something — wildebeest, I think, idiotically — until I remember that the wildebeest, like yesterday's tigers, are pure fantasy: this country ran out of room for the big herds a long time ago.

Part of the day's kindness, though, is simply Matt. For the first time all week one of us has the route loaded onto his GPS, and Matt rides as our oracle, calling back what the road is about to do — where the climbs are and how many, when the next descent will arrive to save us. It sounds a small thing. It is not. Every other day we had ridden blind, and blindness, I'd learned, is its own peculiar torture: you cannot tell whether the rise ahead is a brief thing to stand up and power over, or the foot of a five-kilometre wall to be hoarded against, so you either spend everything on a molehill or get caught with nothing in the tank against a mountain. At home I ride with a little Beeline on the bars that murmurs all of this to me; out here I'd had nothing, and the not-knowing had been quietly grinding me down for days — it was, in the end, the thing that broke me on day three. Now, with Matt calling the road, I could spend myself wisely, and the lift to the spirit was out of all proportion to the mere facts of it. The dark place I had gone to in the night at Muyinga simply burned off with the morning sun. I climbed into a better and better mood all day, and somewhere on those hills I decided — and have not since changed my mind — that day five was my favourite ride of the whole trip.

Not that the road let you forget where you were. On one climb I watched a grinding truck, innocent of anything resembling an emissions control, swallow Matt a few lengths ahead of me in a rolling black cloud of diesel until he vanished clean into it; it happened to all of us, all day, and I managed to catch the one photograph of it I'd get. You breathe a great deal of other people's engines, on roads like these.

We pull over to rest on the lip of that plain, in the thin shade of a roadside bank, and it is here — somewhere around the fifth day of meaning to — that I finally ask Kath about the dodo.

Because two of our number have been carrying one all week. Paul has his zip-tied to the front of his handlebars, where it has spent six days being sandblasted by the same dust and hammered over the same potholes as the rest of us; at one point on the first day someone reported, with the gravity of a battlefield surgeon, that *the dodo's still on — but it's bleeding*. Kath keeps hers tucked into the back pocket of her jersey, from which it was once, briefly and scandalously, stolen. They are soft toys, comically dishevelled, and for the best part of a week the rest of us have been asking after them — *how's the dodo getting on?* — without the faintest idea why they were there.

The answer, when it comes, is far lovelier than the running gag deserves. The two dodos are named after Kath and Paul's two children. The couple are South African, but they have lived and worked in Mauritius for nearly a decade, and the dodo — that doomed, flightless, faintly ridiculous bird — is the emblem of the island they have made their home; so they had brought the children's namesakes along to carry a little of Mauritius across Burundi with them. "But nobody seems to know what they are," Kath admits, a touch

crestfallen. "So it's fallen a bit flat." Someone offers, consolingly, that there is a famous stuffed one in the museum at Oxford — the only one any of us has ever seen — which does not obviously help.

I find I love the whole thing the more for its having fallen flat. There is something properly tender about hauling two extinct, flightless birds up and down a thousand Burundian hills out of pure homesickness and parental love — the least useful cargo imaginable, in a country where every other bicycle on the road is freighted with water and charcoal and the sheer hard business of staying alive. On a day spent marvelling at the bicycle as a workhorse, Paul and Kath's were the only two loads going that did no work at all. They were, I thought, rather the better for it.

PEACE LOVERS

Somewhere on the road, I remember the radio station.

It was back in Bujumbura, in the days before the ride, that we were shown around a radio operation with a mission statement of almost comic ambition for so modest a building: *to reach the world for Christ*. They make twenty-one programmes here. The one that matters to me is called **Abakunzi b'Amahoro** — "Peace Lovers" — and it is, put simply, a programme about how to stop killing one another.

It was born in 2015, the year Burundi began, once again, to come apart. There had been a coup; there were burning barricades in the streets; the radio stations the country trusted were being torched. And a few people had the idea that if you could get to a microphone that hadn't yet been

burned, you could broadcast, into all that smoke, the deeply unfashionable instruction not to throw the stone.

Simon tells us how it began, and it is not a comfortable story. He called a meeting in town, in those first days, not knowing — he says this flatly — whether he would come home from it alive, and not knowing whether a single person would turn up. They turned up. Young people streamed in past the very barricades everyone else was manning, and he stood and told them what no politician was telling them: that they were being whipped up to die, and that they did not have to. Months later, one of them found him. *I am alive because of that meeting*, the young man said. *I was about to go and throw stones with my friends. They are all dead.*

I have heard a lot of grand claims made for the power of broadcasting. I have never heard a cleaner one than that — a programme that kept a boy off a barricade, and so kept him breathing.

A decade on, *Peace Lovers* still goes out, around the clock, in five languages — Kirundi, French, Swahili, Lingala, Kinyarwanda — across Burundi and over the borders into Rwanda and Congo. The testimonies they read us are all versions of the same quiet miracle: *we heard how we can ask one another for forgiveness and live in peace, and now we are in peace.* It is, I realise, the very thing Charles had done alone in his banana grove — only set to a transmitter and aimed at a whole region at once.

They show us round with enormous pride: the production room; the debate studio with its double soundproofed doors; the prayer rooms in the middle of town, with their drift of shoes left at the threshold. Then, almost shyly, the newest thing — a receiver, installed only the week before, that has finally let them see where their signal lands. After years of casting reconciliation out into the dark with no idea who caught it, a screen now tells them that somebody, somewhere off in Russia or Asia, is tuned in. A tiny station at the heart of a small, wounded country, throwing peace as far as it will go, and only now able to watch it travel.



Open road through the hills.

IV. NGOZI

Late in the morning we caught the fast group, which ought to have been impossible and was explained by a clutch of punctures that had pinned them to the roadside for the best part of an hour. We came together at the point where the two routes divided — the centre of attention in a small town where, a few feet away, a man was arc-welding with what looked like two bare cables run straight off the mains and a stick of filler, an operation I admired from what felt like a sensible distance. We topped up on bananas; they mended their tubes; and then they swung right for the long way round and we went left for the short, not to meet again until the hotel — where, having ridden half again as far, they rolled in not so very long after us. We'd taken the short way and had a proper head start, and still they had all but reeled it back; I could not make the arithmetic of it work, and gave up trying, and simply marvelled at the engines on that team.

Ngozi, when we finally reach it, arrives as a sensory overload. After days of empty roads and open hills, a busy Burundian town hits you all at once: the press and the bustle of it, the traffic thickening, the haze of dust and exhaust — and, winding through all of it, the most wonderful cooking smells, woodsmoke and frying and spice, pouring out of doorways and roadside stalls. The day's last sting is that the Hotel des Plateaux sits, as the name rather gives away, up on the plateau, which means a final grinding climb straight through the heart of the market — threading the bike between people and stalls and motorbikes and the odd goat, every sense full to the brim — and at the top, the day is done.

The hotel turned out to be the smartest we'd stayed in: a brand-new block of rooms so fresh that, for the second time in three nights, we

appeared to be the very first people ever to sleep in them. There was hot water, and just enough daylight left to wash a week of road out of my kit in the shower and hang it over the balcony rail to dry in the last of the sun — which, after the Butlins night, felt like an almost indecent luxury.

Most of the group went off in search of a massage — there was a place in town, the Winner's Hotel, that did them — and I, for once, had something better to do. The wifi, for the first time all trip, was strong enough to carry a video call, and so I spent that evening four thousand miles from home and also, somehow, sitting in on my daughter Alicia's Year 10 parents' evening, listening to one teacher after another say lovely things about her. I would not have swapped it for any massage in Africa. It is a strange and wonderful thing to be praised by proxy for your child while still crusted in the dust of a Burundian hillside, and it handed me, exactly when I needed it, a clean strong draught of home.

Earlier, a television that nobody could find the will to switch off had begun spontaneously generating karaoke, and the rest of the team — Paul not least — had fallen upon it with the unhinged delight of people who have ridden a very long way and may suddenly stop. I have it on video; I stood at the edge of it and filmed the lot of them, helpless. Between the bellowed singing and, set quite apart from it, the quiet of the parents' evening, it felt like precisely the right way to end the best day's riding yet.

And there is one more picture from that night I would frame if I could. Jonny, at the dinner table, still wearing his cycling helmet because he has not yet found the spare minute to take it off, shovelling down rice with both hands black from the bike and his face so streaked with the day's dirt that he looks for all the world like a

Victorian child just down a chimney — and grinning, grinning enormously, at the pure animal relief of being fed at the end of a hard day. I have rarely seen a man look happier. I knew exactly how he felt.

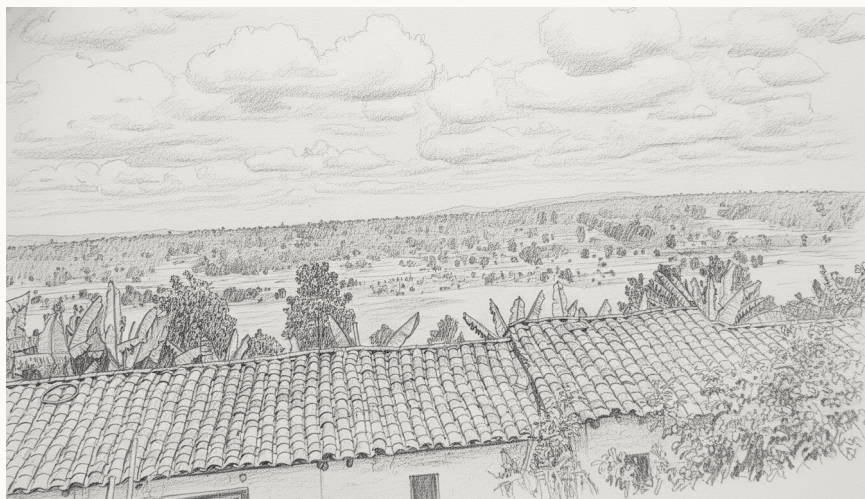
Five down. Two to go.

The Drum and the Farm

88 km / 55 mi · 2,571 m / 8,435 ft climbed



88



Tiled roofs in the folded valley.

I. A GENTLE START, AND A REMARKABLE FARM

The sixth day opens kindly — a long, easy three-and-a-half-kilometre freewheel out of Ngozi in the cool of the early morning, the cloud breaking up — simply a gift before any of the work begins. The town is waking around us: sheets laid out at the roadside with crops drying on them, a skinned pig strung up by its back legs, pyramids of limes and lemons for sale, the day assembling itself.

Then, before the riding proper, the morning's great surprise: the farm.

THE UCCD FARM

The most quietly radical thing I saw in Burundi was a farm.

On the morning of the sixth day, before the riding, we stop at a place run by a ministry called UCCD, and it takes me a while to work out what I am looking at, because it is several things at once and won't sit still in any one of them. It is a working farm — proper Foundations-for-Farming agriculture: conservation tillage, no expensive chemical fertiliser but a bio-fertiliser they brew themselves, sweet potatoes, a dairy herd, harvests measured in tonnes. It is a training school, teaching the surrounding community to farm better. And it is, of all things, a retirement home.

That last one undid me, once it was explained. There is no pension here. None. A man can give his whole life to pastoring a rural church — decades of it, for almost nothing — and arrive at old age with no savings, no state to catch him, and, in the end, no option but to beg. So somebody had the idea of building a farm productive enough to fund a dignified home for exactly those men, the faithful and the forgotten; to teach the village new techniques while they were at it; and to throw off a surplus so the whole thing pays for itself. We meet some of the old pastors, in the plain front room of the home that will see out their days, and they sing to us — "Jesus Loves Me," of all the simple things — with a little clapping game folded into it: your own hands, then your neighbour's, palm to palm, on the beat. I cannot keep a beat to save my life, and the gentle old man I was paired with was, I think, not much better — there was a frailty to him, a softness at the edges, that made me wonder what the years had taken — so the two of us patted along a half-beat adrift of each other and of everyone else, and could not have cared less. I have a photograph of the pair of us, a

selfie, his face lighting clean up at the sight of his own face in the screen; it is one of the few I would carry out of a burning house. Because the old, I have always thought, are an exaggerated version of whoever they already were — the years sand you down to your grain — and if that is so, then to arrive at the end of a long, hard life in a country this hard and be *this* full of joy, this quick to sing, you must have been building it, brick by patient brick, for seventy years. You do not get a face like that by accident.

I spend a good while afterwards, back on the bike, trying to put my finger on why the place moved me so much, and I think it is this. I have spent a career in software, building projects and judging them, fluent in the whiteboard language of the things — multi-purpose, self-sustaining, surplus-generating, locally owned — and this farm ticked every box on the board. It is the precise opposite of the thing the cynic in me half-expects of Western charity in Africa — it is not imperialism in a nice jumper. Nobody flew in to run it. The whole model is to put in a little seed capital and then stand back and watch Burundians run with it, and they have run a very long way.

It helped that they fed us. The hospitality was its own small sermon: out came a kind of mini baguette, almost a croissant, and after a week of next to no bread — and I love bread the way some people love their children — I confess I pocketed half of it for the climb ahead. You can carry a project home in your head. You can also, it turns out, carry some of it in your jersey.



The road cut into the escarpment.



A curving road under eucalyptus.

II. THE GRIND

What the farm does not do is flatten the hills, and the hills, today, are merciless.

We climb out of the valley with the sun up properly now and the heat building, and I settle into what day six mostly is: a grind. Somebody explains the economy of the road to me as we go — a man loads a bicycle far past all sense, walks it down into the valley and along the bottom, and hires the village boys to shove it up the far side; then he turns for home and does it again. That is how cargo crosses Burundi: valley by valley, on foot, by muscle.

For a long stretch the road turns almost alpine, cut deep into the rock, twisting up through bends I can't see around. And here the rock does something I hadn't bargained for: it shelters you so thoroughly that the cooling breeze we've been riding in all morning can no longer reach you — and the instant it falls away, the full heat of the day lands on you at once, close and heavy and inescapable. Then the road swings back out of the cutting, the breeze finds me again, and I greet it aloud with real gratitude: *hello, old friend*. You are most welcome.

The traffic is sparse and occasionally strange. Once, coming hard the other way, a Toyota Hilux and a pair of blacked-out SUVs, half a dozen men with rifles riding in the back, travelling at real speed — someone important, going somewhere fast — and gone, the road empty again behind them. Somewhere a man shouts *quickly, quickly* at me, and I think: tell me about it, friend. I am well overdue a descent.

There is an accident further on — a lorry gone off the road, its back end a mess, police already there — and the thing I remember is not

the wreck but the children: a line of them, well back, calmly laying branches across the carriageway as a warning to oncoming traffic, which is about the most ingenious bit of improvised road-safety I have ever seen. It had only just happened. *Good job we weren't around*, somebody says.

And underneath all of it, the plain fact of being tired. *Je suis fatigué*, I tell someone, scraping the bottom of my schoolboy French. *I'm glad it's day six*, I confess; *I'm struggling*. I cannot hold the quick riders on the climbs any longer, and I have stopped pretending otherwise. But then you pass a school — a couple of hundred children spilling down to the roadside, cheering, every one of them wanting a hand to slap as you go by — and the legs find something they did not have a moment before, and you are hauled up the hill on pure borrowed delight. I wish I had filmed it. I never quite manage to film the best things.



The royal drummers of Gishora.



Dancers at the sanctuary.



A thatched royal house at Gishora.

III. THE DRUMS

GISHORA

We are not told where we are going. Simon likes a surprise almost as much as he likes an unreliable distance estimate, and so the afternoon's destination is billed only as a "mys-

tery stop" — and I come round a bend, and there it is, and I hear myself say it aloud: *oh — it's the drums. The Drums of Burundi.*

I had read about them, in the weeks before, the way you read up on a country you're about to cross, and here they are, unannounced — one of the very few things I had specifically hoped to see, handed to me by an itinerary I didn't choose. This is Gishora: a hilltop sanctuary of sacred royal drums, the drum that for centuries was the living symbol of the Burundian king, the thing that sits in the middle of the modern flag.

I make my approach with enormous dignity. There is a cobbled climb up to the sanctuary, and I take my shoes off and go up in my socks — and I would dearly love to tell you this was reverence for a holy place, and I do, in fact, try that excuse out loud, but the truth is my feet had gone to ruin in the cycling shoes and the bare cobbles were a blessed relief, and "barefoot pilgrim" is a more flattering self-image than "man who needs to get fitter."

At the top, the sanctuary opens into a king's court out of another century — a cluster of traditional houses, round and thatched and beautifully made. You duck inside one and the first thing that strikes you is how *cool* it is — the temperature, I mean: the thick walls and the smoke-dark holding a real chill against the heat of the afternoon. Simon walks us through it like a tour of living memory: that Burundi and Rwanda were once bound together as one, until they parted at independence in 1962; that the king's wife was a person you did not see, ever; that the smoke is kept

deliberately inside the houses, with no chimney, because the smoke is what drove out the mosquitoes — and, once, the lions. You stand in the cooking-smoke of a vanished monarchy while a whole lost world is sketched for you in a few minutes.

And then the drums. There is something like a hundred kilos of them up here, and you are invited, if you're brave, to take a turn. I am no good at rhythm, said so, asked to be allowed to hide at the back, and had a go anyway on a drum taller than a toddler. But the thing that empties your head is the full ensemble, the real drummers, all going at once: the timing is simply unbelievable, a dozen arms rising and falling as one body, a sound you feel in the sternum a half-second before it reaches your ears. It is the most purely beautiful thing on the whole trip, and the oldest — a music that was being made on this hill before my grandparents were born, that has outlasted a monarchy and a colony and a civil war, and is still, on a hot afternoon, knocking the wind clean out of a sweaty Englishman standing there in his socks.



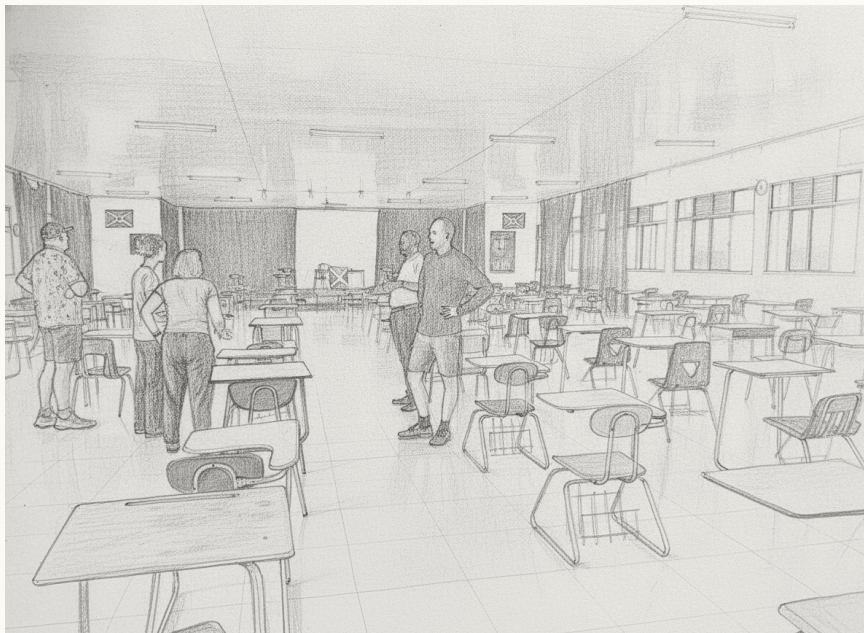
The group on the road into Gitega.

IV. INTO THE CITY

After the drums, the last few miles into Gitega — the political capital, set, like everywhere here, on a hill — bring the unmistakable feeling of arriving in a city: buildings everywhere, traffic everywhere, after a week of open country. We ride in single file through the thickening streets (Paul, somewhere back, contrives to fall off and land on a small local boy, both of them more startled than hurt). It has been one of the hardest days in the saddle of the whole week — I pushed, and I paid for it — and yet it has also held the farm and the drums, two of the finest things in the entire fortnight, one at either end of it. But the day is not done. There are, it turns out, children still to meet.

One Child at a Time

GITEGA · THE EVENING OF THE 11TH OF JUNE



Gitega International Academy.

The day ends with children.

We roll into Gitega in the late afternoon to the last two stops on the itinerary, and in a way the point of all the rest of it: a school and a children's home, a bus ride apart and run as quite distinct operations — though both, I gather, part of the same broad Youth for Christ family, whose work here is enormous and covers a great deal of ground — built on the unreasonable conviction that the way you mend a country is one child at a time, over twenty years, with no shortcuts.

The school is Gitega International Academy. It was begun in 2012 on a bare field, by people who believed — and I don't use the word loosely, because they meant it quite literally — that if you prayed and started building, the buildings would come. They came. The very first of them were funded, of all things, by three people who cycled the length of Britain and raised the money — which gives me a sheepish kind of kinship with the place: other cyclists, a few years before me, turning pedal-strokes into classrooms. Now it teaches a few hundred students under a motto with no false modesty in it — *Integrity, Excellence, Leadership* — and sends them out, into Canada and America and back into Burundi, as the teachers and pastors and leaders the country has to grow if it is ever going to stop bleeding.

And here the whole abstraction of it — *raise a generation of leaders* — suddenly had a face, because there, showing us round the school beside the headmaster, was Gaga. Gaga, who had been our fixer for the whole fortnight, the one who seemed to know everyone and could conjure a vehicle or a meeting or a solution out of clear air — Gaga was a GIA girl. She had come through its doors among the first ninety-odd pupils, when the place was still half-built and wholly unproven; had walked these same corridors as a self-conscious teenager (she told us, laughing, that she'd hated having her photo taken, and that there survives exactly one picture from her school years with her face in it, and that one by accident); and had gone out from here to become precisely the sort of capable, trusted, country-shaping adult the founders had prayed the place would make. At the end Simon prayed a blessing over the school and named it without dressing it up: hundreds more of Gaga's boys and girls, he asked, raised up and sent out to change the world — *she's a sign of what this place can do*. She was, too: the thesis of the entire trip, made flesh and walking us round her old classrooms.

A bus ride across town brings us to Homes of Hope, and this is the part that takes your legs out from under you. It is an orphanage that has decided not to be an orphanage — not a dormitory of the parentless, but a set of households, each with a mother, raising children the way a family raises them. Fifty or so of them. Some arrived off the street; some of those are now at university. A couple, I'm told, came in only recently, and are still filling out, still learning that the food is going to keep coming.

There is, while we are there, a press-up contest — something of a tradition, I gather — a few of our riders, Sam, Matt, Jonny and Simon, taking on a couple of the older boys, and the deep and settled tradition is that Simon wins. Nobody had briefed Sam on the tradition. Sam, to general delight and Simon's visible reappraisal, simply beat everyone.

And at the children's home, they dance for us. I had braced myself to find it merely sweet, and it was instead genuinely beautiful — there was an elegance and a control to it that took me clean back to the professional dancers I'd once watched in Bali, except that here it was being performed for a knot of tired, sunburnt strangers on bicycles, by children most of the world had already given up on.

You arrive at a place like this braced for sorrow — these are, after all, children the world has broken — and instead you are knocked flat by the sheer, dignified life of them. The brokenness is real. But the children dancing in the dusk are more real, and they are winning.



The Gitega hills, from the terrace.

The Reckoning, then Home

12TH OF JUNE

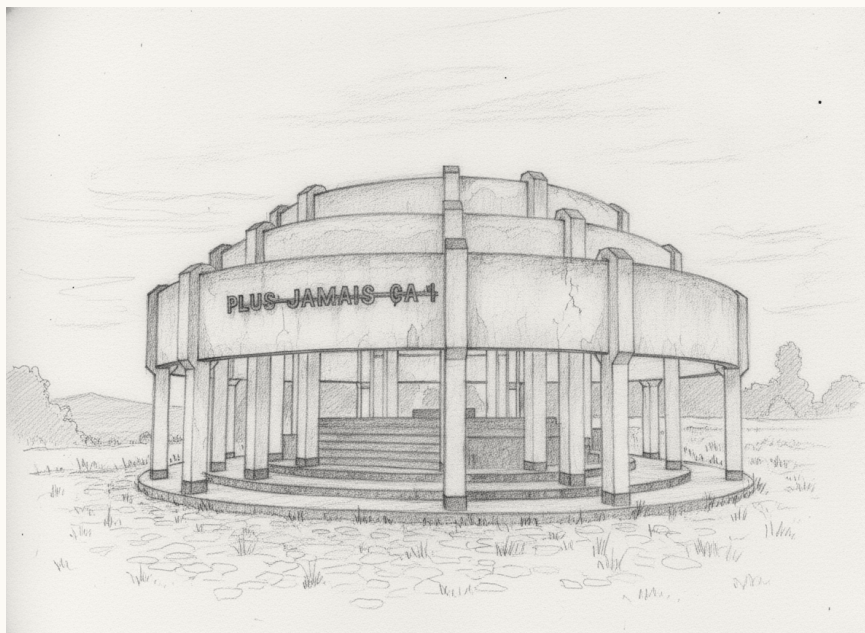


GITEGA TO BUJUMBURA

109.1 km / 68 mi · 2,541 m / 8,337 ft climbed

I. THE WORST ROAD

The final day begins on the worst road of the week, which is also, with a certain irony, the most important: the highway joining Burundi's two capitals, the political one we are leaving and the economic one we are aiming for. It is busy, and broken, and after six days of main roads as empty and quiet as Oxfordshire lanes it is a shock to be back among fast traffic — lorries and cars overtaking blind on the bends, one of them passing close enough that its wing-mirror clears my elbow by what I reckon, with no exaggeration, to be a couple of inches. I spend a good part of the morning frightened, and the rest of it climbing, because the day saves its real descent for the very end, and makes you earn it first.



The memorial at Kibimba — Plus Jamais Ça.

II. THE SITE OF A GENOCIDE

Somewhere in the late morning, Simon says we are going to stop, and I hear myself say the flattest, least adequate thing I said in the whole of Burundi: *we're visiting the site of a genocide. I'm in no hurry.*

KIBIMBA

On the morning of the last day, we stop at a petrol station where they burned the children.

I had read about this before I came — the burning of the schoolchildren at Kibimba was one of the darkest things I

had learned about the country I was about to cross — but it had honestly not occurred to me that we would come to the place itself. Simon said only that we were stopping. Then he told us where we were, and the thing I had read and the ground under my feet collapsed into one. I got off the bike and walked, slowly, around and through the place, and I have been trying ever since to find words equal to it, and I am not sure that I have any.

Here is what happened here. On the 21st of October 1993, hours after soldiers had assassinated the country's first elected president and set the whole nation alight, a crowd seized the Tutsi pupils and teachers of the school at Kibimba, herded them into a disused petrol station, and set it on fire. They burned them alive. The gentlest counts say around seventy; others say more than twice that. They were schoolchildren. There is nothing I can write that will make that land the way standing on the spot makes it land, so I will not try to dress it up: this is a place where, within living memory, dozens of children were burned to death for the group they had been born into.

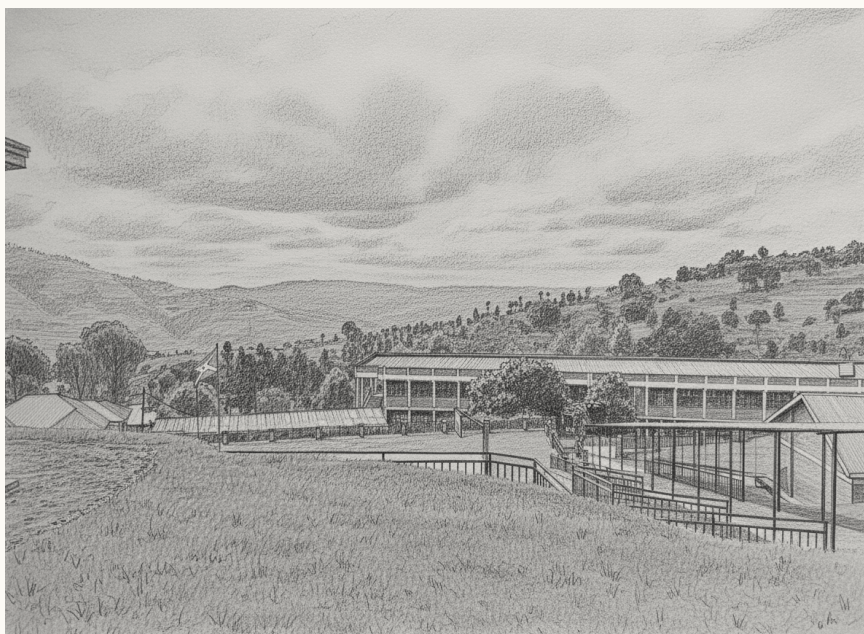
I walked through it in a kind of fog. The whole fortnight had felt like a dream — I had spent two weeks pinching myself, unable to believe I was really in the middle of Africa at all — and now the dream had carried me here, to stand in the most ordinary-looking place imaginable and try to take in the most terrible thing, and the two would not fit inside one head. There is a memorial now. It reads, in French, *Plus Jamais Ça — Never Again*. I was in no hurry to leave.

And here I have to step carefully, because the truth of this place is larger than any single monument can hold, and the largeness is part of why it matters. What happened at Kibimba was an atrocity, plainly and without qualification: one people murdering the children of another. But it was not the only direction the horror ever ran. In those same weeks, the army and others killed Hutu civilians in their thousands; two decades earlier, in 1972, the state had slaughtered Hutu on a scale that dwarfs almost everything else in the country's history. The dead of Burundi do not all have a stone. Some sufferings are marked and mourned in monuments; others are carried only by the families who remember them, unmarked — depending, in part, on who did the killing, and on who holds the pen of the official story. To stand at Kibimba is to grieve, utterly and without reservation, for the children who died on this spot — and also to feel the vast, unequal weight of all the country's dead who have no such place to be grieved. That is a delicate thing to say in Burundi. It is also true, and I do not think you can honestly stand here and feel only half of it.

And yet. The people who survived this place did not answer it with more fire. They came back; they reopened the school, and the hospital; and on the very ground where their friends had burned, they built something they called a peace committee — a deliberate, daily, cross-ethnic refusal to let it happen again. *Plus Jamais Ça*. It is the same impossible arithmetic I had been shown all week — Charles in his banana grove, a radio station broadcasting forgiveness into the smoke — except that here it was worked out at the

very highest price, by the people with more reason than anyone alive to choose the other thing.

We got back on the bikes. The road out of Kibimba tips, before long, into the great descent — twenty kilometres of falling air, all the way down to the lake and the city and the end of it. I have never been more grateful for a downhill, nor felt less as though I had earned one.



A school on the hill, near Muramvya.

III. A LONG CLIMB, AND A SCHOOL ON A HILL

You do not, it turns out, get to sit with a thing like that. There is a bicycle, and a road, and the road carries you on whether you are ready or not. It falls away from Kibimba first — a descent, before anything — then it turns and tilts upward into the long climb the day has been saving, building toward a final brute of a hill near the end. Matt, calling the road as ever, breaks it to me that we have some eleven kilometres to go, nearly all of it uphill, with — he adds, encouragingly — a couple of downhills in there somewhere; and I tell him that this is rather like telling a man whose leg has just been amputated that the bright side is he'll halve what he spends on shoes. But somewhere on the way there is a stop that does, quietly, the work of putting the morning back together: a school and a small clinic set on the edge of a hillside, with a view that runs for miles, where children are fed and taught and the sick are seen, and where the delivery room had lately produced, among others, a couple of new baby boys. This is the Harvest School, and Simon tells us it is another of those bare hillsides that GLO and its partners have turned, over patient years, into all this. We put our heads round a classroom door and a roomful of children sing us a song in French; we are shown the kitchen, where a vat the size of a dustbin is boiling cabbage for the boarders' supper. And it is over that pot of cabbage that the day lands its quietest, hardest blow, because the boys who board here, we learn, get meat twice a month — twice a month, while further up the same country we had been served meat at two consecutive meals and been mildly put out when the chips ran low. I have seldom felt the gap between my life and the one in front of me as plainly as I did just then. The children, for the record, looked wonderfully well on it: in their uniforms, taught to clean their teeth, getting a square meal a day, most of it new. I stand and

take in how much has grown on that hillside in fifteen or twenty years — buildings, a programme, a future from almost nothing — and I remember the line somebody offers me there, which lands all the harder for following Kibimba: *don't overestimate what you can do in a year; don't underestimate what you can do in ten*. The same country that can burn a school full of children can, given ten patient years, build one on a hill. Both of those are true, and you do not get to keep only the one you prefer.

At the top of the last climb there is a lodge and — rumoured for miles, and entirely real — chips. I have rarely been gladder of anything.

It is a lovely spot — a guest house with monkey-puzzle trees and a long hazed view out over the distant city — and Simon, it turns out, is rather besotted with the place, and means to buy it one day and retire here; whether he has yet talked Lizzie round is, I gather, still an open question. We sprawl on the grass to stretch out our legs, and after the chips somebody produces a little dish of chillies for the brave — fierce Scotch-bonnet things, the very kind I grow at home — and I take the most cautious nibble imaginable, mindful of a stomach I would rather not provoke this close to the end, because I have never once in my life managed to leave a chilli alone. And it was there, on the grass in the sun with the long drop home still ahead of us, that Gaga told us her own larger story — which is hers, and which I will leave with her.

IV. THE LONG WAY DOWN

The descent did not, at first, behave like the descent of one's dreams. The road down off the mountain is really one long, strung-out roadside village — a busy artery, the closest thing Burundi has

to a motorway — and for the opening stretch I found myself, absurdly, *held up going downhill*: stuck in a slow rolling scrum of a minibus behind a minibus behind a truck behind a moped, the cyclist somewhere in the queue. Whenever the road straightened I would dart past the lot of them; whenever it so much as twitched upward they would grind past me again; and so we leapfrogged our way down, engines and bicycle swapping places, until the gradient at last tipped hard enough and long enough to be all mine.

And at last, the day gives up what it has been withholding since dawn: the descent. Twenty kilometres of it. Off the high spine of the country and all the way down to the lake, the air thickening and warming with every hundred metres lost, the city assembling itself out of the haze far below, the road unspooling in long fast sweeps with the support vehicles strung out ahead and a moped for company. It was, by a distance, the longest descent I have ever ridden — and Matt, who has done the proper Alpine ones, reckoned it topped even those. It is, I thought at the time and will not take back, very probably the most exhilarating thing I have ever done — and the strange grace of it is that the country chose to let me go this way, on wings, down the very hills I had spent a week grinding up, as though the whole exhausting fortnight had been the toll for this one falling hour.

And yet I cannot let the descent be only joy, because I was not the only cyclist on those hills, and for the others it is no game at all. The local riders take these same long drops at appalling speed — heavily laden, on machines whose brakes barely brake or do not exist at all — because a bicycle that won't run fast downhill is a bicycle that cannot earn its keep. They are known, I'm told, as the *suicide cyclists*, and the name is not a figure of speech: the toll among those

who get it wrong, on bends exactly like these, is dreadful. I came down this hill for the thrill of it, with good brakes, an empty bike, and a support van at my shoulder. They come down it for a living, with none of the three. The same twenty kilometres of falling road; two entirely different prices.

V. KCC

I had got to the bottom of the descent first, as it happened, a clear ten minutes ahead of the next rider, and I spent them at the agreed roundabout on the edge of the city, gathering a small and entirely good-natured crowd — which always pricks a faint nervousness when you are alone, conspicuous in your strange foreign lycra in an unfamiliar city whose language you do not speak, and aware that the people pressing cheerfully around you could, if they chose, relieve you of everything you owned in about four seconds. They didn't, of course. They never did, anywhere, the whole trip: the wariness was always mine, and never once earned. When the rest had trickled in and the group re-formed — a good half-hour — we set off together for the last push.

The final miles into Bujumbura are city miles, heat and smog and rush-hour chaos, a different and lesser kind of courage after the freedom of the hill, and we were grateful for the support vehicles bracketing the pack, one ahead and one behind, to keep us from being strung out or swatted into the gutter. We had been told there would be local camera crews at the line, so we gathered ourselves into tidy twos and threes for the last turn down to the hotel, and came through a tape strung across the path into a small storm of party-poppers and cheering. My one ignoble thought, in that moment of supposed triumph, was a fervent hope that I would not fall

off in front of the cameras: the surface just before the gate was a loose and treacherous scrap of off-road, and pitching into it after four hundred honest miles would have been exactly the sort of flourish I had in me. I didn't. We all made it in. Somebody put a cold non-alcoholic cocktail into my hand — very probably the most delicious thing I have ever drunk — and we fell to hugging and congratulating one another while a braver couple of us gave interviews to the press.

And then it was, quite suddenly, simply done. Nearly four hundred miles. I had got off the bike at the Kings Conference Centre, where a fortnight before all of this had still been ahead of me, and I could scarcely believe I was back — let alone that I had ridden every mile of the way to get here. *Stop the clock*, somebody says. *Hallelujah, you made it*. And we had: the whole ragged, mismatched, generous-hearted lot of us, standing about in the courtyard and blinking at one another in a sort of stunned, grinning disbelief. The whole thing had the quality of a dream — that long descent especially, the views especially. The circle was complete. We made it.



The finish, back at KCC.

What They're Building



A church gathering at Gasenyi.

I am back in West Oxfordshire, and there are two bags of dresses in a drawer.

The bike is cleaned and hung up; the legs have recovered; the numb feet came back. And life has closed over the fortnight the way water closes over a dropped stone — the desk, the lanes I know every yard of, the ordinary days. Except that something in me sits at a slightly different angle to all of it now, and there are, as I say, the dresses: made by women in Bujumbura I will never meet, waiting in my house for me to hand them on — the one solid, holdable proof that any of it really happened.

I keep coming back, in my head, to the grave at Matana. To Harold Guillebaud, who crossed the world to give a people the Scriptures in their own tongue, and died before he could see the work finished, and lies in that ground under a word that has since drifted, in the living language he helped to write down, to also mean *duck*. It would be a sad story, if it stopped there. But it doesn't — because his great-grandson Simon came back into the same country, in the middle of its worst years, and stayed; and built, out of that returning, a web of more than twenty-five Burundian partnerships, one of which, by a chain of small improbabilities, set me on a secondhand bicycle at the foot of his great-grandfather's church. A man dies with his life's work half-done in 1941, and most of a century later a column of middle-aged amateurs is grinding over the hills he loved, for the people he came to serve. You do not get to see, in your own lifetime, what your faithfulness will grow into. That, I have come to think, is rather the point.

And what it has grown into is people — which is what I actually went to Burundi to meet, and what I have not stopped thinking about since. Charles, the champion runner who stood in a banana grove with a rifle and one of the men who had murdered his parents, and put the rifle down. The radio station broadcasting forgiveness into the smoke of a burning city, and the boy who is alive because of it. The seamstresses sewing their way out of the worst that can happen to a woman, in colour. The hospital keeping premature babies alive in incubators built from eucalyptus and lightbulbs, run by people who could have stayed home and rich. The farm that funds a dignified old age for the pastors the state forgot. The school raised on a bare field by faith and a charity bike ride, and the children's home where the orphaned are brought up into leaders. The men freeing the wrongly imprisoned; the teachers reaching

children no one else can reach; the ministry making cartoons so that a Burundian child has something good and their own to watch. I have given them a sentence each, which is an insult to every one of them and the best I can do here. Not one of them is waiting for the West to save them. They are saving their own country, patiently, person by person — and they let us come and watch, and cheered us up their hills while they did it.

And even that roll-call leaves people out. When the riding was finished we had two more days in the country, off the bikes at last, and they were as full as any on the road. We drove out into the bush to sit in on an outreach event — the patient, unglamorous work the partners do when there are no cyclists to cheer and no one watching at all — and I got to visit the church at Gasenyi, which is a partner of my own church, Cogges, back home in Witney: a thread I had not expected to find myself standing inside, running all the way from a field in Burundi to an ordinary Sunday morning in West Oxfordshire. There are whole stories in those two days, and good people in them, that I have no room for here — more sentences I am failing to write, or reducing to this one. I can only say that they happened, that they mattered, and ask the ones I have hurried past to forgive the hurry.

None of which I would have seen — not one grave, not one drum, not one eucalyptus incubator or sewing machine or rescued child — without Simon. It was his trip in every sense: he led it, hill by hill and pothole by pothole, with his cheerfully unreliable distances and his unfailing eye for whoever was suffering at the back. But it is far more than a trip to him; it is his *life*. These partners are not names in a database to him — they are the work he came back into a war to begin, the people he has spent a quarter of a century seeking out,

believing in, championing and standing beside. He and his wife Lizzie have each been appointed MBE for their service to the country — the sort of honour that tends to find the people least busy looking for it. To watch a man pour himself out, year upon year, for a country at once as beautiful and as broken as this one — and to do it with so much joy and so little fuss — is its own kind of education. Thank you, Simon, for leading us; and thank you, far more, for the thing you led us into, and for the life you have given to it.

That thing has a name — Great Lakes Outreach, or GLO — the organisation Simon founded in 2003 and still runs today. Its model is the precise opposite of the well-meaning Western charity that flies in, runs a project and flies out again. GLO exists to seek out the ablest, most visionary Burundian leaders — in farming, in broadcasting, in medicine, in education, in business, in the church — and to get behind them: with funding, with connection, with belief, so that they can transform their own country in their own way. The people and projects in this book are tied to GLO in one way or another — some partners now, some it has worked with in the past, some simply friends of the work in the wider sense — and the money we raised reaches that work through GLO. It is, when you stand back, an unusually humble idea for a charity — *find the people already doing the work, and help them do more of it* — and it was into twenty years of that idea, and counting, that our daft fortnight of cycling was, in the end, one small and joyful contribution.

I have thought a great deal, since, about the gap between us. I came to Burundi to ride a bicycle for fun, and flew home. For the boy hauling water and the suicide cyclist on the long descent, the same machine is survival, and sometimes death. I am a soft-handed man who sits at a desk, who got hot and tired and tearful and had to be

carried up a hill by a fitter, kinder, much younger one — and who was met, every single day, on every single climb, by a country that had every reason to resent the spectacle of us, and instead came pouring out of its houses to wave. I do not know what to do with that generosity except to report it, and let it change me, and not look away.

The doctor who showed us round the hospital asked us, when we took our photographs, to capture the beautiful Burundi more than the brutal, broken part. I have tried to do that here. The broken part is real — I stood at Kibimba; I have not pretended otherwise — but it is not where I want to leave you, because it is not, in the end, what the country *is*. What the country is, is a thousand green hills impossibly farmed; a music older than the monarchy, drummed on a hilltop; children by the million swarming the verges to slap your hand; and people, everywhere, quietly rebuilding what was broken, against every reason to give up. That is the Burundi I rode through. That is the one I would ask you to carry.

Thank you, too, to the others on the bikes — Andy and Anthony, Matt, Sam and Tim, Kath and Paul, Annie, Jenny, Simon E and Jonny — a ragged, generous, frequently hilarious band I had mostly never met and would now go a long way to ride with again. Half the joy of the whole fortnight was simply theirs: the banter on the climbs, the daft press-up contests, the energy gel forced kindly into your hand on a bad afternoon. And thank you to the people who got none of the glory and did half the work: Jean Lobiko, who pointed a lens at us all day long; Cedric and Desire, who cooked us back to life at the end of every brutal stage; and the drivers — Eric, Nicola, Jonathan and Jean Paul — who shepherded a convoy of vans and a luggage-laden Hilux across a whole country without losing any of it,

or us. And above all Gaga: administrator, fixer, sorter-out of the unsortable, the human glue of the entire operation — who, when illness put her in a hospital bed partway through, hauled herself out of it to come back and carry on. And Raissa, who at barely thirty minutes' notice stepped into Gaga's shoes at the very start of the ride, and made it look effortless. Every one of them playing their part — and the whole improbable machine running smooth because of it.

And to those of you who backed me — who put money behind a slightly mad idea and a man who'd never seriously cycled before — thank you. It went where it should. Between us, we raised £60,000 — and here is a figure worth pausing on: the rough rule of thumb out there is that a pound given does something like ten times the work on the ground in Burundi that the same pound would do at home, because hard currency stretches so much further. £60,000, then, doing closer to the work of £600,000. I have seen, with my own eyes, the people it reaches and the work it does, and I can tell you it is real, and good, and worth every penny. I would offer to do it all again, except that my family has heard quite enough about my knees. So I will just say this instead: the dresses are in the drawer, the photographs are mostly of my knees and the ground — and somewhere in the hills above Bujumbura a man is laying down a rifle, and a radio is telling a boy not to throw the stone, and it is all of it more beautiful than I have managed to say.

About Great Lakes Outreach

THE CHARITY THIS RIDE WAS FOR

This ride was in aid of Great Lakes Outreach — GLO — the charity behind everything in this book. It was founded in 2003 by Simon Guillebaud, who had first gone out to Burundi in 1999, during the civil war, when the country was widely called the most dangerous on earth. Its vision, in its own words, is to see Burundi transformed in Jesus' name, and its method is to find and back gifted Burundian leaders of integrity rather than to run things from outside — transformation, as GLO puts it, both bottom-up and top-down.

From an office in Bujumbura, GLO now works through more than twenty-five local partners across the country, in church and evangelism, education, health, agriculture, business and media. Simon and his wife Lizzie have both been appointed MBE for their services to Burundi. The people and projects in these pages — Kibuye Hope Hospital, Trans World Radio, the schools and the farm, Foundation Charles and the rest — are part of that network.

HOW TO HELP

Every mile of this ride was about raising money for that work, and the simplest thing you can do, if any of it has moved you, is to give — as a one-off, or each month as what GLO calls a *GLO Ambassador*, which is the steady, ordinary giving that keeps the work running.

UK donors can give at giving.greatlakesoutreach.org.

Donors in the United States, where GLO is also registered as a not-for-profit, can give at glous.donorsupport.co.

FIND OUT MORE

Website: greatlakesoutreach.org

Email: hello@greatlakesoutreach.org

Phone: +44 (0)1494 766731

Post: 1st Floor, Tower House, Latimer Park, Latimer, Chesham HP5 1TU, United Kingdom

In the United States — email usglo@greatlakesoutreach.org, phone +1 843 996 8890, or write to PO Box 14465, Charleston, SC 29422.

Great Lakes Outreach is a registered charity in England and Wales (no. 1097267) and a company limited by guarantee (no. 4686283), and is registered as a not-for-profit organisation in the United States.

A Note on How This Was Made

This book began as talking. Across the fortnight of the ride I carried a small voice recorder on the handlebars and narrated as I went — the climbs, the pig on the bicycle, the things people told me at the roadside — and added, in the evenings, whatever the day had left in me. Those recordings were transcribed, and from the transcripts, with the help of an AI assistant (Claude), they were shaped into the chapters you have just read. The aim throughout was fidelity: every scene traces back to something I genuinely saw, said, or was told, and the connective tissue between scenes was kept consistent with that. The history and the facts of the places and the partners were researched and cross-checked against more than one source where I could manage it, and the route itself was verified against the GPS tracks from the ride.

All the same: a book made this way — from a tired man's voice notes, written up with the help of a machine, about a country I had known for two weeks — is bound to contain mistakes. Names I misheard on the road; dates and details that have drifted; the occasional confident sentence that turns out to be wrong. Some of those errors will be mine and some the AI's, but that distinction does not matter and I will not hide behind it: this is my book, and every mistake in it is mine.

So if you spot one — a fact, a name, a place, anything I have got wrong, or anyone I have not done justice to — I would be genuinely grateful to be told, so that I can put it right. Please do write and let me know. And to everyone in these pages who let a sweaty stranger

on a bicycle into their work and their story: thank you, and forgive me anything I have rendered imperfectly. The fault is in the telling, never in you.

Version 3 · built 22 June 2026 · 07:13 BST