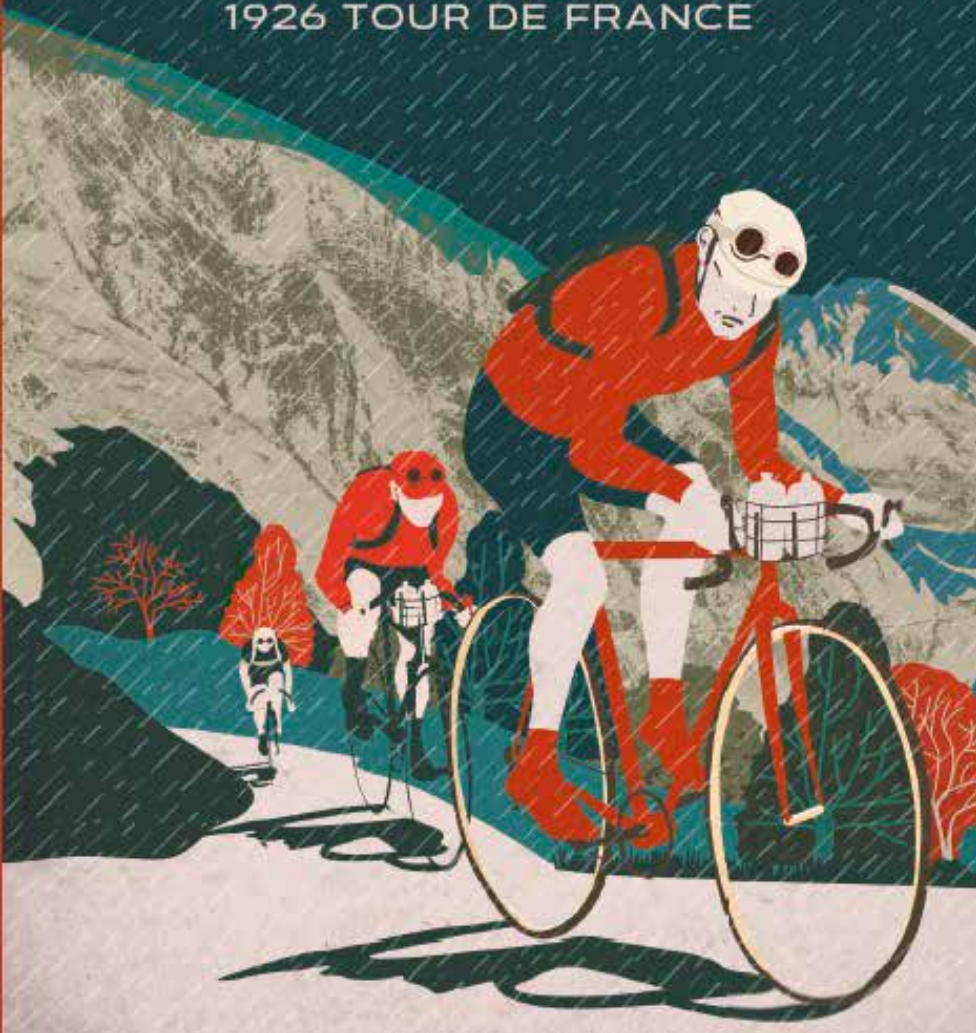


GARETH CARTMAN

# WE RODE ALL NIGHT

THE STORY OF THE  
1926 TOUR DE FRANCE



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## Chapter 1

# Stage 1: Évian-les-Bains– Mulhouse

Distance: 373km

### *Marcel Bidot*

You ask me, Marcel – what is it you do for a living? You are young, and you live well. And I would reply with some hesitation that I am a bike rider. Ah, you might say. A bike rider. Like old Eugène, right? Like Henri Pelissier! Are you going to win the Tour? And I would reply with a little of the yes and a little of the no. Yes, I ride the Tour de France, but no, I am never going to win the Tour de France.

As a boy, you start your career full of delusions. Delusions that you can become the next Henri Pelissier, and as you grow into a man those delusions weigh on your shoulders. Look at all the riders who have gone to the Tour since it started. How many have won, and how many have lost? What if you re-evaluate the meaning of ‘lost’? What if I were to suggest that not winning could make a man rich? I am not paid to win the Tour, I am paid to help someone else win the Tour. They call me a *domestique*, a man-servant, a helper on wheels. I shield my protected rider from the wind, I give him my wheels when his wheels break, I fetch water from fountains for him and I cajole him as he enjoys my slipstream. To do this, day-in, day-out, the boy must become

a man, drop the delusions and realise that bike racing is a career like any other.

Imagine a factory in which every worker dedicates himself to providing the finished product! You have the early Tours right there. Independent men, little isolated factories each and every one of them, slogging up mountains and riding dusty plains alone. I would read of their exploits in every publication I could lay my hands on, I'd cut clippings out and keep them on my bedside table so that I could feed my dreams in the middle of the night. Marcel Bidot, winner of the Tour de France, in his dreams. Delusions, I tell you now. What, statistically, are the chances? One in 50 every time you race? Or do you submit yourself to the factory, knowing that you contribute to the end product – a victory – and that you are handsomely recompensed for your effort. A career that pays much more than that of the factory worker or the farmhand, two choices open to me as a boy from Troyes.

I was deluded when I lined up in those junior races, not so many years back now. I was riding against myself, powering up climbs that would leave me breathless, sprinting when I was outpaced by friends like André and Antonin. Had I the wisdom, I would have picked a winner, asked him to go halves, and given him my back wheel to suck for hours on end. When I lost my delusions, I realised I had an engine. And what an engine! I don't have explosive power, I have regularity. I have consistency, and I can tell you everything that's going to happen in a race before it happens. This means I have value. A rider like me is highly sought after by sporting directors precisely because I have *no* delusions of grandeur. I am dependable, and without ego.

Racing has changed. Look at Lucien Buysse, pulling Ottavio Bottecchia to the foot of the mountains these last two years. The ultimate *domestique*, sacrificing his own

chances for those of a more likely winner. He'll do it all again this year, and from everything I hear within the peloton, he's paid almost as well as the Italian himself. And Bottecchia is building his own house. So you can tell that's a lot of money.

My winner is Nico Frantz.

A good *domestique* should know his master inside and out. This is my first year, so I am learning on the job, observing, watching for clues. What can I say, right now, about my master? I can say that he is most definitely Teutonic. Slim, but chiselled, as if sculpted from the ground upwards, reaching out to the sky. A quiff of hair is carefully prepared each morning in taciturn silence, combed with a diligence that matches his preparation for each day's racing. His kit is laid out on the bed with absolute precision; there is a methodology to Frantz that I like, even if I do not share it. Each item is carefully stretched out, aligned, counted and then double-counted. They are then removed, packed away, and sometimes, taken out again. This is a modern rider, an athlete who leaves nothing to chance, who wants no distractions from the art of winning bike races. Imagine Jean Alavoine, for instance, a man of a similar build but different era, having Nico's dedication to perfection. To have the talent is one thing but imagine how many Tours Alavoine could have won.

To some, Nico would appear aloof. Witness his behaviour on the train down to Evian, his detachment from the bonhomie of his team, his refusal to play cards or to join in with tales of the girls we've met. Nico simply gazed through the window at the empty stations and passing fields. No distractions, just purity of thought.

Watch Nico with his machine, see how he studies every bolt, every weld, how he places his hands on the handlebars, how every gesture is precisely weighted. You cannot win a bike race if you do not know your machine, and Nico

knows his machine intensely. You must be both athlete and engineer, you must know each and every spoke on each wheel. When you sit atop your bicycle, you are together as one. The pedals become your feet and your feet become your pedals. The great riders have always known this. The average riders could leap on any bicycle and pedal away, but the winners, those who are born to success, they are incomplete without their bicycles. I sense this with Nico. I sense a greatness as yet unflourished, as if discovering a tulip on a cold day in March, its petals tightly clung together yet hinting at perfection of form.

The tulip needs nourishment. Good soil, some sunlight, a little warmth. It could flower alone, but it requires support to truly blossom. This is my job. This is my response to that question – what do you do for a living? I allow flowers to bloom. Maybe I'm a gardener on wheels.

And there are moments, like now as we ride this first stage of the Tour, when the as-yet-untold legend of Nicolas Frantz, the unbloomed flower, appears ridiculous. How could anyone assume that the man behind me, the sculpted man of the future, my master and – so we all say – future Tour de France winner – is anything other than a fable? The sculpted upward quiff has collapsed amid a torrent of sweat, his silence is broken by half-mumbled curses, our race is getting away from us.

It started with Bottecchia, who launched a foolish attack on the Faucille at seven in the morning. That sent riders springing out of their carefully formulated race plans. A Buysse came dancing past, it appeared to be the younger of the two, and my natural reaction was to follow, expecting of course that Nico would follow in my wake. He goes, I go, you go. We all go.

I mentioned before, I am learning on the job. When your master doesn't have the legs or the lungs, you must drop

back and provide him with yours. So together we watched Jules Buysse ride away, diminishing over the horizon with obvious joy. Others slipped past with a look of surprise, of guilt even. How can this be? Therefore, we settle into a rhythm, and it is I, Marcel Bidot, who sets that rhythm. Occasionally, Nico grunts *faster* or *slower*, but mostly he just goes along with the pace that I set as I learn how to coax more out of my master, how to get him out of his stupor.

A good *domestique* should get into his master's head. Should know which words or facial expressions activate his master's brain like an acupuncturist looking for the right point on the skin. Again. I am learning on the job. Nico doesn't like conversation, I quickly learn. We must ride in silence, again punctuated by mumbling curses or urged on with a short *faster* or *slower*. In that silence, am I a supplicant, or am I in charge? Does Nico respect me? Does he believe in me?

These thoughts begin to plague me as we roll gently up and down through never-ending countryside, through tiny villages and repeated churches. I watch awkwardly as Nico fills his bidon at the fountain and feel pride at the pat on the back before he leaps on his machine, shouts *bop* and urges me to take position once more, at the front. With each puncture, we have time to get to know each other, to deepen the bond between *domestique* and master, not through words but through acknowledgements, gestures and actions. If I can show efficiency, speed of thought, consideration, then I am a valuable *domestique*, a good servant. And if we can get through today, if this is the worst of Nico, then I can get him to the Pyrenees in two weeks' time and allow him to be the best of Nico.

My work is done once we cross the finish line. From there, the factory line takes care of Nico, delivers him to his *soigneur*, disrobes him, swaddles him and nourishes

him. A whole team of mechanics attend to his machine, they clean it, they oil it, they look to remove all friction and return it to perfection only for Nico to ruin it the next day. But uncomplainingly, they will return to work each evening, restoring his machine to its former glory while another team of masseurs get to work on the machine that is Nicolas Frantz. Pyjamas are made ready. Beds are prepared. Steaming baths are run.

I partake. After all, I am part of the factory line. If Nico is to win the race, he needs his *domestique* in prime condition, and he requires his *domestique's* machine to be cleaned, oiled, restored to its former glory, so that once again, master and servant can ride. And so, I am nourished, bathed and prepared for work once more.

But I am aware of the whispers, the conversations beyond the bathroom door. The 30 minutes we have leaked to the yellow jersey wearer, Jules Buysse, the pallid face of Nico, oh but didn't Marcel do well today. In snatches, I hear tones of disappointment, hints of frustration, suggestions that Adelin Benoît may well be our best option, but again, what of Marcel. Magnificent Marcel. Did I ride too well? Did I out-perform my master? Perhaps we should reallocate Marcel. I mouth a silent scream – I quietly beseech – I've only just begun. Reallocate Marcel indeed! I'm learning on the job. We can fix this. I can get Nico to the mountains, I can deliver him safely. If you'll only let me do my job.

\* \* \*

### *Paul Guitard*

Camille and I were in the middle of a heated, yet entertaining, debate about the proletariat's essential centrality to the Tour de France, when he leapt from his seat and leaned out of the car window with a fury I had not seen of him before.

'Fuck you, Bottecchia!' he yelled, jabbing a finger at the Italian champion.

The rider glared at him, expressionless.

'Fascist pig!'

The rider was no longer glaring at him. Camille is not important to this Bottecchia.

Camille pulls his head back in through the window, winds it back up and huffs. Camille huffs a lot. He is a huffy individual, and yet a good colleague. An honest comrade.

'I hate that fascist bastard,' he resumes, folding his arms rather dramatically. 'Did you know, this man is a pure economist. See how he economises his effort like he economises at home. Little money-grabber that he is. Exploiting workers for his bikes, and he's a FRIEND OF MUSSOLINI!'

The last part was shouted out of the window for the benefit of our Italian friend, who perhaps understands now the passion of the journalist.

Camille straightens his suit and appears a little embarrassed at his outburst. We sit in silence and periodically he looks around at Bottecchia as our driver keeps pace with him. He looks grey. Sick. Should he be working?

It is true, however, that Bottecchia is a fascist. And a capitalist. He rides not for the love of sporting endeavour, not for the love of his team and the collective spirit of cycling, indeed not for the love of the proletariat who line the streets, but for the love of money. We hear that he is building his own home back in Friuli. A bricklayer, laying bricks not for his neighbours, not for his commune, but for himself. Time was when a bricklayer would be put to work and paid for an honest day's work, but a bricklayer laying bricks for his own ends – fascist pig.

The Italian has climbed off his bike, and I can see as he recedes from our view that he is waving over a colleague,

no doubt to have his puncture repaired. The fascist would never dream of repairing his own inner tube, now, would he?

Camille is becalmed and has found more pleasant company in the personage of an independent rider whose name I do not know. Here is an honest type, with a face that has seen the inner workings of a factory. Hands that have operated machinery, one imagines. I lean forward to join the conversation.

‘Young man, are they treating you well?’

He tuts. ‘They give me 20 francs a day, and have you seen the food we get?’

I admit that I have not yet seen the food. ‘Do show, young man.’

He hands us a bag. ‘I know you’re honest boys at *L’Humanité*, you won’t steal anything.’

I nod back to him, of course we won’t steal, comrade. Camille pulls out a sub-standard chicken leg, most likely from an under-fed chicken, one of those that is held in a cage and fed scraps. He holds it as if holding a dead mouse. There’s barely any meat on it.

‘I say, is this what everyone gets?’

‘Oh yes,’ he says, hanging on to the side of our car, ‘unless you’re in one of the professional teams. You should see the chicken legs they get!’

I nod. Yes, I can imagine. It is our first year covering the Tour de France. We are naïve to the inequalities within the race.

‘Brother, here is your chicken, and the rest of your bag. I will have a word with Mr Desgrange as soon as is possible about your treatment. As a worker, you absolutely must be treated on a par with every other rider.’

He puts his hand on his heart. ‘You’re good boys at *L’Humanité*, I read your paper every day.’