



FILIP OSSELAER

REMGO
EVENEPOEL

FULL GAS

Strive for perfection

Lannoo



For Patrick and Agna

For Oumi

And for Remco

‘He’s good, apparently, your son’

(Patrick Lefevere goes out for a meal for the first time with
Remco Evenepoel’s father and mother)





FOREWORD

My name is Agna.

I'm Remco's mother.

Lots of people address me like that, it's true: 'You're really the mother of...?' I see people looking at me and thinking: 'Look, that's his mother!' To be honest, it bothers me sometimes. Of course, I'm proud. Of course, I'm the proud mother of a 24-year-old son. But I was already that from the very first day of my pregnancy. His cycling career hasn't changed that. People sometimes say to me: 'It must be really special, having such a talented son!' But that's not how I view it, not at all. Aren't all parents proud of their child? Surely they are? (Or they should be...). Because all children have their talents, whatever they do, whatever their achievements. All children deserve for their parents to be proud of them, to sing their praises.

No, Remco's life hasn't been without its ups and downs. From a young age he has trodden the most difficult path – that was his own personal choice. During those periods, those phases, it wasn't always easy to fit in with his wishes and slot everything into place. But I dare to say – for all to hear – that together with Patrick, Remco's dad, we did everything we could to make our son happy, to make things go the way they should for the best. Patrick and I often told each other that we never wanted to regret not letting Remco do what he thought he needed to do – Remco would never be able to say that he wasn't allowed to do something. Our family, our close friends know how we feel about this, what our experience of it all has been. And that was all before Remco ever got on a bike. The only thing we expected from him was that he would put in the effort, just as we did, even when we had no idea where he'd end up today. And that effort? That was no problem for Remco, far from it. It was even at the expense of his performance at school. To be honest, that was often to my great annoyance! I could be strict. I believed school was important. I didn't always give in, and then he would go to his dad – perhaps he was a bit of a softer touch, that's in Remco's nature as well. Yes,

that's the way it is: as a mother, you tend to look at certain things differently. I'm a dedicated mother.

Remco sets goals for himself. And he's strict, really strict about them. People see the pleasurable moments, the moments of success, after yet another victory, after yet another stunning performance. But there's often a flip side to the medal; there are the disappointments, the crashes, the less successful days. Does the outside world give enough thought to that? Far too little, you know. It was not a matter of course to have to let go of Remco, our child, so early. It wasn't easy to have to miss him so much – and it still isn't. It can be days, weeks even before I can give him a hug, a kiss, and during the busiest periods, even that's not possible – apart from doing it via WhatsApp. On the day of a race, we don't see him, we just can't get near him, and sometimes he doesn't have time for us. Even so, at least we're there for him. Our presence, knowing that we're standing somewhere along the course is enough. Remco senses our support.

Such times apart, they are difficult times. But I know why he's doing it and that helps. It also helps when I see how independent Remco is, still only a youthful 24-year old, a young man who makes the small and the big decisions, making his own way through life's twists and turns. These are the moments when I realise that I wish I could keep that little boy small forever, that I could keep him by my side always – but also the moments when I realise that Remco has spread his wings, and I know that I have to let him go.

I know this about myself: letting go is something I need to work on (and isn't that the case for lots of parents?). I often miss Remco when he's back on the road. I miss Remco when he is once again swallowed up by the persistent demands of others, of the outside world, by the rapid and steep ascent he is experiencing. It's times like that when I want to hold on to him a little more, to watch over his well-being, his happiness – it's not good that others start dictating his life, that others make decisions

without taking what he wants into account. I'm aware that sometimes Remco's life is restricted, and he can handle that: Remco is patient, I know that, I feel it. Up to the point when it becomes too much, until he explodes when he's had enough of it. Then, I want just one thing: that he follows his own heart, keeps his eyes wide open, for the rest of his life. That he can continue to enjoy what he does, with the people he loves. I don't think Remco fully understands how much this weighs on my mind, how often I miss having him around for a real conversation about it – that little boy from the past, my son.

At a race, my eyes are looking in all directions at once. As a mother, I see and feel so much. I see the failures, I see the suffering. But I hide my feelings then, or at least as best I can. In that regard, Remco and I are alike: falling and getting back up – don't let it get to you too much, just keep going.

The older I get, the more I realise how quickly the time passes. When I was younger, I didn't dwell on that. And maybe that was a good thing, else we might have made decisions in the family that we (and Remco) would have regretted. That's not the case now. When we were young or younger, we made the right choices. We won't have anything to regret. Remco has now reached the place where he wanted to be. And he's worked hard for that.

He'll continue to do so, right up to the end of his career. As his mother, I just want him to remain happy in everything he does, in everything he undertakes.

Then, with a deep sigh, I'll be able to say: 'My little boy, whom I love with all my heart, has achieved what he worked so hard for.'

Agna

1

PROLOGUE

A warm, sunny day in the north of Italy – the morning of 15 August 2020.

That was the date for the start in Bergamo of the 114th edition of the Tour of Lombardy. The riders will cycle all the way to Como, a distance of 231 kilometres, following a fantastic route that winds up and down through mountains and valleys against a background of stunning scenery featuring lakes, ravines, and babbling streams. The Tour of Lombardy is heavy going and only the best riders win, with only the greats appearing on the honour roll, from Fausto Coppi to Tom Simpson, from Felice Gimondi and Bernard Hinault to Roger De Vlaeminck and Eddy Merckx – it's no place for amateurs.

The Tour of Lombardy is normally the last major classic of the cycling season. That's why the race is poetically called in Italian 'la corsa delle foglie morte', which means 'the race of the falling leaves'. The coronavirus measures were responsible for the beautiful autumn classic being held at the height of summer.

Strange, confused times characterised 2020.

In the middle of March, the world plunged into lockdown. Schools, restaurants, shops, museums, playgrounds, and cafés – all had to close because of coronavirus. Working from home became the norm as you were no longer expected, or indeed allowed, to come to the office. Normal life was put on hold, families lived in bubbles, friends had no choice but to stay away, and loved ones could only see each other remotely on a laptop or iPad screen, or by waving through the window of their home. Stuck in solitary confinement, people died. Was the purpose of seeing each other over the course of a lifetime merely to cause pain? And now a final hug, a last conversation was no longer possible – this was not something we humans were used to. The virus had cast people into a new reality, a frightening reality of remoteness, isolation, ignorance, and uncertainty: what else might happen? Hospitals were bursting at the seams and the healthcare system was pushed to the limit by the 'pan-

demic', a new word that inveigled its way into everyday vocabulary. Everything that happened is of course familiar to you, dear reader. After all, you lived through it all yourself.

But on 15 August 2020, the world was slowly coming back to life; people were allowed to leave their homes again, still subject to restrictions but it was a start. They could breathe again, and enjoy a modicum of freedom once more – freedom to travel, to eat and drink in company, to enjoy themselves.

There was freedom to race again.

The entire cycling calendar was in a complete mess, with tours and one-day races being rescheduled. On 8 August, Wout van Aert was the winner of Milan-San Remo. In a normal year, this course is the season's first classic. La Primavera. Wout finished ahead of Julian Alaphilippe from France and Michael Matthews from Australia. The Tour of Flanders – yet another Monument – won't take place until 18 October, when it will be won by Dutchman Mathieu van der Poel. Two weeks before that, on 4 October, Slovenian Primož Roglič took victory in Luik-Bastenaken-Luik. Confusing, n'est pas? But wait and see, it gets even more complicated: on 3 October – just a day before the Walloon classic – the Tour of Italy kicked off in Monreale (Sicily), where the 15-kilometre time trial was won by the Italian Filippo Ganna. On 25 October, the Brit Tao Geoghegan Hart took the pink jersey. He won the Giro, 39 seconds ahead of Australian Jay Hindley. But – can't you just sense it coming, there's even more confusion with the Tour of Spain also starting in the meantime on 20 October. Still following? A big tour in the midst of another big tour? Can it get any crazier? The Vuelta was won on 8 November by Primož Roglič. And, moving on, yet another change: having been scheduled for 25 October after all the rescheduling, in the end Paris-Roubaix was simply cancelled. Was riding over the cobbles thought to be too dangerous in the middle of autumn? Or was the virus once again too rampant? The Tour de France had also taken place meanwhile, from

29 August to 20 September, with Slovenian Tadej Pogačar the winner of that Tour.

That's just the kind of year it was.

But back to 15 August: Remco was one of the favourites in Lombardy. That was no surprise since in the races that did take place on schedule in 2020, he had been exceptionally good. He'd won the Tour of San Juan, the Tour of the Algarve, the Tour of Burgos, and the Tour of Poland as well. Born on 25 January 2000, Remco was then 20 years old. In mid-August, he crowned his already glittering season with a victory in Lombardy. The newspapers were at least able to agree on that: Remco was in form, Remco was going to win. Remco himself was also convinced and had expressed this ambition – the self-belief was present. Of course he believed in himself.

Even so, it didn't feel right, something was off.

'No, it didn't feel right,' says Patrick, Remco's father, some 4 years later. 'It was true, it didn't feel right.' Patrick arrived in Bergamo in the morning along with his wife Agna, best friends Pascal and Nadine, and daughter-in-law Oumi. They were met there by people they knew, people from the entourage of the Deceuninck-Quick Step team. Joeri De Knop from *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the Flemish newspaper, welcomed them. Patrick has known Joeri for a long time and has a good relationship with the journalist. There were others there too and it was busy in the vicinity of the hotel, with people getting in each other's way – the race was about to start and the sun was shining. Camera crews were present from VTM, the commercial television channel from the Evenepoel family's home country, but that didn't bother them as a documentary was being made about Remco. Patrick, Agna, and Oumi had got used to their presence and knew by now how to deal with all the attention. It was part and parcel of the fact that Remco had gradually become a celebrity.

‘But Agna said that something wasn’t right,’ says Patrick.

What was it though?

In a departure from their normal habit, Patrick, Agna, and Oumi went to the team bus just before the start. What was going on? ‘Remco had sent us a message,’ Patrick recounts. ‘He wanted to see us for a moment. Just before setting off.’ They were warmly welcomed there at the start and there was no fuss from the organisers who told them to go through, no problem. ‘We could go wherever we wanted and I bumped into Joxean Matxin Fernández from UAE, whom I knew from the past when he was a scout for Quick Step. He said to me, “Have a good race later,” and some other small talk, you know how it is. It was hectic, there around the bus.’ He pauses, taking a moment to gather his thoughts: ‘Things weren’t right. No, *that’s putting it too strongly*. It seemed like... Well, what did it seem like? We’d arrived OK, we’d flown there in the morning, the weather was nice, you couldn’t fault it. And yet: Agna had a nasty feeling. How come? I don’t know. It’s something Agna has, a gift, something special. She senses things. I don’t know how she does it.’

Patrick scrolls through the photos on his mobile. There they are: the pictures from 15 August 2020, Bergamo, Italy. ‘Look,’ he points, ‘here we are standing next to Remco. And here, that’s us hugging him.’ Why is a family so intensely intimate before the race begins? Because a person is glad to see their child, their son, their loved one. Because something is going to happen, perhaps. That’s probably it: a person senses it, they don’t know exactly when and where it will happen, but it’s coming, that much is certain.

The race started and the Evenepoel family made their way along the course, wanting to follow how the competition would develop. They saw the riders go past twice and each time Remco gave the thumbs-up. Rushing by, he’d recognized Patrick, Agna, Oumi, and the friends –

everything was going well. There was another 100 kilometres or so to go.

'In the meantime, we'd arrived at Luca Paolini's coffee house,' says Patrick. Paolini was a former professional cyclist, the man with the ragged beard who'd won the 2015 Gent-Wevelgem, the edition with awful weather, persevering through rain and wind, over slippery cobblestones, over Casselberg and Monteberg, *In Flanders Fields*, a war zone in times of storm and adversity, where riders were blown off their bikes – Gert Steegmans ended up in a ditch; you can find the footage on the internet. Paolini was removed from the 2015 Tour after being caught using cocaine. After an eighteen-month suspension and at the age of 40, he found himself without a team. As the media put it at the time, '*Dopo la squalifica, la nuova vita di Luca Paolini riparte da un bar di Como*'. 'Following his suspension, Luca Paolini is starting a new life and opening a bar in Como.' Sitting there were Patrick, Agna, Oumi, and people from the team's staff – general manager Patrick Lefevere, Alesandro Tegner, the team's communications manager. Also accompanied by some UCI members and Gianni Bugno, the former world champion. They watched the tour on television while having a cup of coffee. There was still another 50 kilometres to ride.

And then it happened all of a sudden: the disaster.

The riders had ascended the Muro di Sormano, and a leading group of seven strong men had formed: Vincenzo Nibali, Bauke Mollema and Giulio Ciccone from Trek Segafredo; George Bennett from Jumbo-Visma; Aleksandr Vlasov and Jakob Fuglsang from Astana Pro Team.

And Remco Evenepoel from Deceuninck-Quick Step.

As soon as they were below, having completed the few minutes of descent, it would still be a good 40 kilometres to Como. In around an hour, that was where one of the seven leaders would win the Tour of Lombardy.

‘Dries Devenyns, the super domestique, had set up Remco perfectly,’ recounts Patrick. ‘Remco started the descent in the lead.’ But he decided to drop back. Was that a spur-of-the-moment decision? In any case: Nibali, a master of descent, was now in the lead. Remco followed, behind. This was not the place where the race would be won and Remco would be better off conserving his energy now, as he’d need it soon enough since there would have to be a breakaway before long, and perhaps a sprint.

Patrick had just taken another sip of his coffee.

‘When I looked at the screen again, I saw Remco’s bike up against that wall. Agna wasn’t sure at first but I knew it immediately: that’s Remco’s bike,’ he says. ‘Remco himself was nowhere to be seen.’ Looking back, Patrick thinks it was weird: at first he did nothing, kept calm and stared at the bike, the bike up against the wall.

Then began nine minutes of not knowing. Nine minutes of no news, of staring at the TV, of concern for Oumi, nine minutes of silence, of waiting for a phone call that came eventually. A call from *Brama* – Davide Bramati, the team manager who was accompanying the race. He said they’d found Remco. And reported that he was conscious. What goes through someone’s head at a time like that? You just stop thinking then, according to Patrick. ‘No, then you can’t think of anything else. Or rather: all you can think is: he’s all right, he’s all right.’

Thank goodness: Remco was all right.
Or maybe not?

Patrick heaves a sigh, and swallows. He thinks back to the hours that followed.

Accompanied by the police, Remco’s loved ones set off for the hospital in Bergamo. To be truthful, they didn’t know what to expect. Remco was

conscious when they put him in the ambulance, that much was known. But was that still the case? ‘We simply didn’t know,’ says Patrick. ‘And we weren’t allowed inside the hospital. The issues with coronavirus were still preventing access in Italy.’

There they stood, in the car park: Patrick, Agna, and Oumi.

‘Well,’ says Patrick. ‘You just stand there.’

Only the team doctor was allowed inside, and that was José Iburguren. ‘We call him *Doki*, little doctor, because he’s not that tall,’ says Patrick.

It was then a case of waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

‘Endless waiting,’ says Patrick.

‘There we stood, in the car park. The press arrived, the first journalists on the scene.’ Once again he repeats: ‘We couldn’t go inside.’

Then there was a new phone call: from Remco himself, calling from his bed, barely a few dozen metres away inside the hospital. Patrick, Agna, and Oumi all reacted in their own way. Still tender in years, Oumi was all emotion, heart-rending, moving emotion. So was Patrick. What had been bubbling up inside him, what he had suppressed, he finally gave free rein to – emotions can do that to a man. All of that wanted to come out in Agna too, but at times like these she becomes the epitome of calm: she kept calm, as probably only mothers can. Agna wanted to be there for Remco, she wanted to look after her son. ‘A mother can start to panic as well. Of course she can! But she can keep calm and she does that perfectly.’

And so Agna listened coolly and calmly to what Remco had to say. She listened to the bad news: Remco was in a lot of trouble. She listened as he said that fractures had been found in his femur and coccyx. This was