

CHAPTER 1

1981—QUEENS, NEW YORK

I LOVED CARTOONS. WHAT KID doesn't? It didn't matter what superhero was blowing up buildings or saving the world: I loved them all. And in perhaps a Freudian prelude to my later life, I especially liked *Tom and Jerry*. I spent countless hours staring at the television dreaming of being a superhero myself. One of the few recurring skirmishes I had with my father, and it happened on a weekly basis, was when he'd pull me and my big brother, Rich, away from the TV on weekends for a morning bike ride.

Originally from Colombia, my father, Ricardo, had moved to the United States in 1964, sending for my mom, Martha, a year later. They brought few things with them except their hope for a better life and my dad's enthusiasm for cycling.

Since 1951, the Vuelta a Colombia (Tour of Colombia) had captivated that country every August. In the 1960s, one of the riders to garner heavy public support was Martín Emilio "Cochise" Rodríguez, who got his nickname because he was a great admirer of the Apache chief from the 1800s known for bravely resisting Amer-

ican intrusions onto Apache soil. *Cochise* (in Apache *Cheis*) means “having the quality or strength of oak.”

It was the strength of this modern-day Colombian cycling warrior that my dad admired and wanted to instill in Rich and me. So as you can imagine, while these weekend rides were a way to combine his loves of cycling and family, they were not leisurely rides, and as we got older and more experienced, he was also primed to give us a taste of competitive cycling to expose us, in a small way, to the effort we would have to exert to be successful at anything we did in life.

Funnily enough, it was my sister, Clara, who provided me with my earliest memory on the bike, when, on a sidewalk in Queens, I graduated from training wheels . . . on her bike.

CLARA HINCAPIE BALTRUSITIS, GEORGE’S SISTER

It’s fun to remember that moment. My bike had a banana seat, and a basket on the front. While he was learning, I’d run behind him as we went around the block. But on that day, he just took off! I was so excited to see him so happy.

RICARDO HINCAPIE, GEORGE’S FATHER

I grew up in love with the bike. I dreamed of sharing my passion with my sons. The first time I ever took George out, for a proper ride of about an hour and a half, he was five or six years old. Rich was much stronger than George, and as we hit a slight uphill, Rich raced through a light that was green, but by the time George, who was desperately trying to keep up, got there, it had turned red. I watched in horror and amazement as he shot through the intersection. He never hesitated, he was so focused on

catching Rich. I knew right then that he had the focus to become a bike racer.

Once I got over being ripped away from *Tom and Jerry*, what I remember most about those early rides is the fun I had alongside my dad and brother.

TOM SPUHLER, CHILDHOOD FRIEND

George's family moved from Queens to Farmingdale in the second grade, and our houses were back-to-back. We'd always say, "I live up the hill, he lives down the hill." We hit it off immediately, since we were both athletes, but George was better than me at everything. Except hitting a baseball! But we all knew, even then, that George was destined to be great in whatever sport he chose. He loved three things: clothes, girls, and competition. He'd compete in anything, the girls went crazy for him, and he'd take the bus to the flea market just to get jeans!

I'm the first to admit, I was an average student. School wasn't hard because I didn't make it so. I was more than happy skimming along just beneath the surface of academic excellence. Even though I was fluent in Spanish, I took the subject in high school so I'd have a free period to daydream of biking.

But my focus on the bike only added to my outsider status during my years in school. I was a shy kid—I'm *still* shy—and I was happiest sharing time and conversation on two wheels.

RANDOLPH SCOTT, CHILDHOOD FRIEND

I was a senior in high school and I'd just started racing that spring. Each Sunday, at the spring series

races in Central Park, we'd race against some of the best talent in the country. There would be former Eastern Bloc riders who lived in the city, national team members, and national champions, all there to test their early-season form. I remember seeing this kid named George who looked my age and acted quite maturely, and we struck up a conversation. The next week, I found out he was twelve!

Very few kids my age were into biking. I was living a real-life version of the 1979 movie *Breaking Away*, where Dennis Christopher's character, Dave Stoller, finds himself struggling to fit in, unable to deny the joy and passion he has for the bicycle.

I spent the hour a day I was allowed to ride memorizing every inch of the twenty-mile loop I circumnavigated near my home. I would attack the pavement twenty to thirty, sometimes even forty, times during the ride. Sprinting as hard as I could, I visualized myself as one of my cycling heroes, Eddy Merckx or Bernard Hinault, able to win races at will. I never felt any pain, only intense joy and freedom.

RANDOLPH SCOTT

Since I had a car, a beat-up, stick-shift Volkswagen GTI, and was the only friend George and Rich knew who had a license, Mr. Hincapie, after I met him, asked if I could drive his sons home after a race. A part of me was scared to take on the responsibility, but the other part, which won out, thought, This could be a lot of fun! We became an inseparable trio that spring and summer.

It didn't matter to me that I was the youngest, often by years, kid in the peloton (literally "little ball" or "platoon" in French, but

more commonly used to mean the entire field or a group of bikers bunched together during a race). I was around peers, no matter what their birth certificates read. At thirteen or fourteen, my skills elevated me into races against men who had been shaving for years. And more often than not, I didn't see someone cross the finish line in front of me.

RANDOLPH SCOTT

George was just this dopey, friendly kid. Winning races to him was like the rest of us reaching into the fridge for a gallon of milk. It took very little effort at all. It was so easy for him. We would go to weekends where he would race in the twelve-to-thirteen-year-old age group, and win. Then he'd do the fourteen-to-fifteen, the sixteen-to-seventeen, and finally the Category 4 race. He'd win or place in all of them, and since every race had prize money, paid in cash, he'd come home each weekend with his pockets overflowing.

TOM SPUHLER

These weren't chump races he was winning. They were some of the best events on the eastern racing calendar. After George would lap the kids in his age group, then enter and usually beat the older ones, the race organizers would come and complain to Mr. Hincapie. Mr. H. would win the argument.

I was an adrenaline junkie. Nothing felt as good as soaring down a hill at sixty miles per hour, but it felt even better to know how to properly set my line in a turn, or to put myself in the per-

fect position within the peloton. It was a high that no drug could produce. I was so dialed in that what men decades older had a hard time convincing themselves to do, I did without even thinking, and with each passing race, that fearlessness transformed itself into experience. And the more experience I gained, the gutsier I became, and the wins piled on. After feeling myself to be average for as long as I could remember, here was something that I not only enjoyed but excelled at. Out on the road, shifting through gears with what seemed like a sixth sense, the road spoke to me through my saddle. A hyperawareness took hold as I caressed the handlebars. My pedals were the contact point for painless pistons. I had found my calling.