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Prologue

They took me under the armpits and lifted me off the ground. They put a crown on my head and knelt before my throne. Everywhere I went, I was VDB, the super-talent, the young god. People started to stutter when they spoke to me. How long does it take before you begin to believe the hype yourself?

– Frank Vandenbroucke, *Ik Ben God Niet*

Belgium is a country where cycling is a religion. Bike races pepper the land and every village has a local hero who has raced their hallowed event, the Ronde van Vlaanderen (Tour of Flanders). Nobody is born a god here; you're made one, by the locals watching in a one-horse town, by the media who fastidiously report even the smallest competitions, by the fans who worship this working-class, down-to-earth sport as in no other country.

From his early bike races, Frank Vandenbroucke was convinced that he was special. At his first World Championships, for juniors in 1991, he was the boldest, the ringleader seeking attention. Everything was a competition. He chastised himself for not winning

or speaking English better, despite his tender years – he was the youngest of a large contingent; earning a special dispensation to travel a few months before his seventeenth birthday. He was already so good, so young, that they bent the rules to have him competing. During the trip, he went up to the *Het Nieuwsblad* correspondent and introduced himself: ‘My name is Frank Vandebroucke and you’re going to be writing a lot about me in the future.’ He was right; he was only a few years away from going into orbit.

For many, just to look at Vandebroucke was to fall in love with him. He had his bar-owning mother’s blonde hair and gift of the gab, his father’s black eyebrows and cycling obsession; he was handsome, with sunken cheekbones and a long Roman nose, yet eternally boyish in spirit and appearance, able to magnetize with a cherubic smile or cocked eyebrow.

He was a curious hybrid, Belgian by birth and un-Belgian in many of his traits. He was born within walking distance of the French border, bilingual in Dutch and French, yet had an Italian look about him and grew to love that country. He was eloquent, vain, charismatic, street-smart and direct. He was good at whatever he set his mind to – but above all, it was cycling. It had to be cycling, the family obsession: he was following his uncle Jean-Luc, a prodigy himself in the late seventies. The new ‘VDB’ was to the manner born.

The sight of Frank on a bicycle was mesmerizing: with his ballet dancer’s legs and calves, bronzed and honed like Ibérico ham with sun and time, turning like a windmill in a gale, his back moving ever so slightly, his brain reading the race tactically like Neo’s nirvana in *The Matrix*, his eyes zeroed in on the road ahead and his mouth a circle. He could make a sport of intense suffering and application look languid and simple. Eulogies were guaranteed.

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No wonder journalists dubbed him the Golden Boy and his disciples called him God. He showed himself capable of performing borderline bicycling miracles which belied his slight build, holding off whole pelotons alone and being prepared to fail with panache in pursuit of great victories.

He was Belgium's youngest pro rider in fifty years and was set on being the country's greatest. 'I want to win everything,' this teenager said. It looked like he could too; he could handle steep Alpine climbs, hold his own in tough time-trials and offer a challenge in any of the sport's one-day Classics. Fifteen years after the retirement of Eddy Merckx, his home media thought they had found his successor on the bike – and a superior in the charisma stakes, a rock and roll cyclist who made incumbent stars, like five-time Tour de France winner Miguel Indurain, Belgian hero Johan Museeuw and Swiss star Tony Rominger, look like bores.

He was not afraid of saying what he thought. He was the best, so why pretend otherwise? Yet any perceived arrogance was offset by an immense humanity. This was a boy who grew up in a provincial bar, talking to everyone and his dog, giving so much of himself and wanting adoration in return. Fans demand emotional engagement from sportspeople, and Frank was a free-flowing fountain of feelings. People were drawn to him and wanted him to do well.

Just as he left nobody indifferent, nobody could quite be sure which Frank Vandembroucke would turn up. Following him was also captivating because of the fragility that went with his talent – a weak knee from a childhood accident and propensity for mediocrity if his head wasn't in the game.

Vandembroucke's bravado was a front; deep down, he was far more sensitive than he let on. He was a rookie gunslinger entering the Wild West, turning pro in a rotten era of doping for the sport.

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The nineties peloton was a burned, nuclear generation with many supermen on the bike becoming lost boys off it, many still suffering the mental or physical after-effects in silence.

In professional sport, the real problems often begin when the race is over or the final whistle blows. Athletes are given all the means and aid for success but get scant preparation for, or protection from, the consequences – the attention, the self-doubt, the money, the fame, the hangers-on, the pressure, paparazzi, the tabloids, the temptations, the accompanying underworld. No sportsperson should be built up into a deity. When gods fall from heaven, it's a long way down.

He could be his own worst enemy, yo-yoing between victory and defeat, joy, hope and despair, great cycling teams and tinpot outfits. Personal relationships disintegrated; he was regularly in front of the law and dabbled with self-destruction several times. For all the hardships, he was drawn back to the bicycle like a moth to a flame, seeking deliverance. As Vandembroucke once said, his life was like a soap opera – and most of Belgium was watching.

God Is Dead is Frank Vandembroucke's comprehensive life story: the human being with so many sides to him at the root of it, as well as the bike racer, the son, the father and the addict. It also shines a light on the beauty and brutality of top-level sport, and searches for answers to his mysterious death through his extraordinary, turbulent life. To what extent was he lost, derailed by bad decisions, misled by negative influences, a victim of miscarriages of justice, of an endemic doping culture, of a media who hounded him? How much did his actions owe to his own self-destructive tendencies, to drug abuse, narcissism, wastefulness, indiscipline and a stop-at-nothing desire for success?

Life is never simple or necessarily fair, either, and there are many shades of grey among all the black and white. You can do wrong

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and still be wronged by people and systems around you. You can fulfil a great deal of promise and still squander so much. And you can be adored by so many and still be chasing love till your dying day.

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Belgium is not a country for heroes, just for underdogs. We keep quiet and carry on . . . But we do need heroes, examples. People who don't break, people who release us from our daily mediocrity. People who can fly, who do things that we cannot.

– Matthias Declercq

With his talent, Frank is the Cruyff of cycling. He could win anything. Except maybe the Tour de France.

– Eddy Merckx

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Ploegsteert

*Sweep onward; and though Fame
Shall aureole your name,
Remember whence you came
In Boyhood days.*

*And in life's darkening years
Look back on hopes and fears
Mingled with memory's tears
And blame and praise.*

– *L'Envoi*, Roland Leighton

The road in and out of Ploegsteert is made of *betonweg*. This cheap concrete surface, common in rural Belgium, has dividers every few metres that cause a discordant *dun-dun* sound under one's tyres. It makes you wonder whether you have a puncture, forces you to question why you are here. Because you do not find yourself in Ploegsteert by accident.

'I don't like to say it, but we call it *le trou du cul du monde* – the arse end of nowhere. If you don't have something to do in Ploegsteert, you don't come to Ploegsteert.' Frank Vandenbroucke's

cousin, Céline Vandembroucke, says with a laugh. A few journalists have referred to it, more histrionically, as the world's end, a place where the wind stops and the trees are bare.

Perhaps that was a particularly grim winter's day, because its outskirts are expanses of flat, open fields and farmland, ripe for a Bruegel painting. When the wind is blowing in the right direction, the scent of manure from the surrounding farmsteads – rather appropriately for a town whose name means 'plough handle' in Dutch – wafts down the main street. Ploegsteert is an outpost, occupying the furthest reaches of Wallonia, yet a stone's throw from both France and Flanders. This little village of 2,000 people sits between the French city of Lille to the south and Ypres, the nearest big Belgian town 15km to the north.

Rust-coloured brick houses cluster around the N365 main road that runs north–south through town, on which the amenities lie. There is a bank, the local supermarket, a bike shop and a chip shop; four drinking establishments lie within a 400-metre radius of the church. Beer is big business here: dotted among the farm traffic, lorries from the Vanuxem brewery lumber through Ploegsteert at regular intervals. It is the principal local employer, closely followed by the brickworks in neighbouring Le Bizet. Heading south towards France, several shops sell cigarettes, beer and chocolate at cheaper prices than over the border, thanks to the reduced rate of duty.

A couple of kilometres north-west, a ridge of wooded hills rises out of the flat valley of the River Douve: the Monteborg, the Kemmelberg, the Zwarteberg, part of the Monts des Flandres chain. Hundreds of thousands of men fell on these slopes, fighting to make negligible gains. Ploegsteert was on the Western Front, and, even a century on, the First World War has left an indelible mark on the landscape and the regional psyche. Cemeteries and memorials regularly punctuate these parts, while the Last Post sounds out on the first Friday of every month at Ploegsteert's circular sandstone memorial. In front of the town's neo-Gothic church stands a

statue of a soldier, a tribute to their lost heroes turned turquoise by the elements. His left arm clutches a gun, his right points to an invisible drama, his mouth is contorted in a cry.

The village was held by the Allies, who dubbed it Plug Street, for all but the first months of the war. The dense wood to its east, where most of the fighting took place, was transformed into a morass of mud, stray bullets and rotting bodies, soundtracked by shells whistling overhead. (Nevertheless, it was still a kinder posting than the ferociously contested Ypres Salient 15km away, with its higher death toll.) The future British prime minister Anthony Eden and poet Roland Leighton served here; Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill were also both stationed on different sides of Ploegsteert at different times. The town itself was nearly destroyed by German shelling; Churchill returned to his office one day to find it reduced to rubble.

Birdsong and trundling tractors have long since replaced the barbed wire and trench warfare. The only battle in which Ploegsteert has a tiny role nowadays is the one over language that divides and defines modern Belgium. The blue signposts at the central roundabout in front of the church offer a clue. Directions are unusually shown in two of Belgium's official national languages, Dutch and French, pointing the way south for Le Bizet and the French town of Armentières, north to Messines-Mesen, Ypres-Ieper and Nieuwkerke-Neuve Eglise. Vandenbroucke's home municipality of Comines-Warneton, of which Ploegsteert is one of five parts, is a particularly eccentric one in a wholly quirky country; it is the twenty-seventh and most westerly of Belgium's 'language facility areas' that cater for both tongues. In 1963, at the fixing of Belgium's modern linguistic borders, this squat wedge, 16km by 61km squared, officially moved from Flanders to Hainaut and became part of Wallonia – despite having no direct geographical contact with the rest of it. It is an enclave of 18,000 people bordering West Flanders to the north and west, and cheek by jowl with the French frontier to the south. Confusing, but that's Belgium – artificial,

plural, simultaneously charming and changeable, just like Frank Vandenbroucke. You couldn't invent it if you tried. The border dwellers who slip across national and language frontiers every day without a thought don't bat an eyelid at any of this. The same cannot be said for unwary foreigners who might easily get lost looking for Lille and only find directions for Rijsel, its Dutch name.

The language divide is one of the biggest points of difference in Belgium. Dutch is the majority, spoken by 57 per cent of the country in the more densely populated northern half, Flanders, while French is the lingua franca in the larger southern region, Wallonia. The third distinct administrative region, Brussels-Capital, in the middle, is officially bilingual but in reality 90 per cent speak French there. (Just to complicate things even further, a third official language, German, is also spoken by 1 per cent of the nation in the far east.)

This is partly a by-product of Belgium's status as a regular battlefield, an important territory at the gateway of Europe passed around like a parcel. From Julius Caesar's conquest of the various Belgae tribes in 57 BC, the feudal states that would eventually make up the modern-day country variously belonged to the Franks, Burgundy, Austria, Spain and France and were merged into the new Kingdom of the Netherlands in the eighteenth century. Independence and the birth of Belgium as a nation state came in 1830, kickstarted by Brussels citizens storming the local garrison after seeing a revolutionary opera. French was the language of Wallonia and the elite, spoken in the law, army and civil service, in spite of a demographic balance weighted towards Flandrians. However, Flanders has grown in population and economic dominion to the point that power has swung. It has led to friction and occasional calls for secession.

The two regions have different flags, languages, newspapers, TV channels, cultures, celebrities and senses of humour; some of the country's inhabitants self-identify more strongly as a Flandrian or

Walloon than a Belgian – and naturally, they both regard themselves as superior.

Flandrians generally characterize themselves as humble and hard-working. Cycling is their national sport, far bigger there than in Wallonia, with bike races like the *Ronde van Vlaanderen* starting out over a century ago as vehicles for emancipation and nationalist expression. Their heroes – whether nineteenth-century revolutionaries or bike racers – tend to be hardy, phlegmatic and uncomplaining; mirrors of how they might like to see themselves. The prevailing stereotype of Walloons is as work-shy lefties living off the nation's hard-earned prosperity by means of redistributed government handouts. Meanwhile, these southern neighbours tend to see their counterparts as dour, xenophobic and boastful. (A sample Walloon joke: 'Why does a Flandrian swallow water when he swims? Because even in the pool, he has to open his big mouth.') It's rather like two teenage foster siblings living under the same roof – very different and barely tolerating one another at times, but able to show surprising unity at others, and more similar than they'll usually care to admit.

It can be popular among the media to exaggerate the degree of enmity; past generalizations are that the only things that supposedly bond Belgians are the royal family, the national football team, Eddy Merckx and an occasional distaste for their noisy neighbours, the Netherlands and France. The modern reality is more nuanced. 'It's in the politics, but not in the people,' one hotelier told me of their supposed differences. Belgium shouldn't function, but somehow it gets by, even if government is a series of compromises, big and small. If, as historians like to say, geography is destiny, Frank Vandebroucke himself was fated to be as multi-stranded as Ploegsteert, transcending limits, switching languages and shifting between certain tribes seamlessly.

Cross-culturalism was in Frank's blood: his father Jean-Jacques had dual nationality when he arrived in September 1947, the first

child of Michel Vandembroucke and French native Simone Haeze. Twin brothers Jean-Luc and Jean-Paul were born seven years later. The Vandembroucke family lived in the gritty industrial border city of Mouscron, 35km east of Ploegsteert. Michel saw the Nazis come through during the Second World War and would regale his sons with stories of the vapour trails of Allied planes overhead, some flying to Germany, others returning with their tails ablaze.

Michel worked as a handyman who sold bathrooms and kitchens. A passionate cycling fan, he took a young Jean-Jacques to races at the track in Ghent (Gent) and to the 1957 edition of Paris–Roubaix, where he saw Belgian star Fred De Bruyne triumph. Those were in his better moods. Otherwise, he showed scant affection to his three sons. Michel was also given to occasional spells of depression and anger, set off by small things such as work pressures or something out of place in the house. His symptoms would probably be diagnosed as bipolar disorder nowadays. ‘When he got into a rage, he became uncontrollable, angry for two or three days. Then after, he calmed down,’ Jean-Luc says. Sometimes, he was violent. Simone was hospitalized on one occasion; on others, the police were called, and the local priest also visited to try to restore peace. The three Vandembroucke brothers witnessed their parents fighting. ‘It was really hard, we were affected by it. My mother never talked of divorce because she thought of her children,’ Jean-Luc says.

Their refuge was the home of their uncle and aunt, Norbert Soens and Simone Adyns, 300 metres away. They would spend hours there after school and stay for longer periods several times a year, waiting for their father’s foul moods to subside. They earned the affectionate nickname ‘Poulet’ (Uncle and Aunt Chicken) for their trade selling poultry in central Mouscron. They were also the humble acorns of the great Vandembroucke cycling family tree: Simone was French national champion in 1926 (‘It was more an informal race than official,’ Jean-Luc says) while Norbert was an

amateur racer who competed in the Circuit Franco-Belge, a prominent local event.

When Jean-Jacques started competitive cycling in the mid-sixties, his mercurial father expected him to win his very first race. On occasion, he wouldn't let him train during the week if he performed badly and forbade him from setting foot in a bike shop, which forced Jean-Jacques to learn how to fix things himself. He regularly won races, but the pressure and mind games can't have helped. As Jean-Jacques grew older, the animosity between father and oldest son increased.

While garrisoned in the Cologne suburb of Ossendorf during military service in 1967, Jean-Jacques fell in love with Chantal Vanruymbeke, the blonde-haired daughter of a member of the armed forces who was also a Belgian Cycling Federation delegate. He attempted to allow Belgian soldiers barracked in Germany to compete in bike races – no doubt music to the ears of the young Jean-Jacques.

On his return, it was back down to earth. The clashes with his father continued until Jean-Jacques moved in with Aunt and Uncle Chicken the following year. Meanwhile, his brothers Jean-Luc and Jean-Paul were saddled with household work and the company's menial tasks. 'He'd tell my father that maybe if he made all his deliveries, he'd let him ride a bike. He always did it, and then he said, "No, you can't ride it." He was an arsehole is what I think,' says Jean-Luc's daughter Céline of her grandfather.

At the end of June 1969, the Vandenbroucke brothers rode to the nearby French city of Roubaix to watch the opening stage of the Tour de France. On their return, they received an urgent phone call informing them that their mother was gravely ill. Simone died that evening from thrombosis, aged forty-three.

Cycling became an escape from grief, as well as from their volatile father. A fast finisher, Jean-Jacques beat the likes of Jempi Monseré and Roger De Vlaeminck, who would go on to be champions of

the sport. Handy in the fast town-centre kermesse races that proliferate in Belgium, Jean-Jacques earned a professional contract with the little Hertekamp-Magniflex-Novy team for 1971 after winning twenty races. He hoped that it would be a first stepping stone on the way to building a legendary career in the sport that obsessed him.

Reconciliation with his father may have been on his mind, but he never got the chance. In and out of hospital with chest and cardiac problems, Michel Vandebroucke died of a heart attack in January 1971. He was gone, but his dark moods would not be forgotten. Both Jean-Jacques and Frank would be gripped by depressive spells later in their lives. 'Our sufferings are genetic,' Jean-Jacques said in a rare interview decades later.

Just like that, the brothers were orphaned and the cycling dream of Jean-Jacques was snuffed out. At the age of twenty-three, he became the legal guardian of his brothers and took over the family business. He had little passion for flogging sinks, toilets or baths and was relieved to close his father's business once everything was sold. Meanwhile, he gave his bicycle to Jean-Luc, having spied his natural talent from earlier training rides.

Jean-Luc proved him right. Six feet tall by the age of sixteen, he towered above the competition. His long, thin levers, chiseled cheekbones, high brow and piercing stare are reminiscent of his nephew. He was a phenom, winning almost 200 amateur races in all manners. 'Every time I won a race, I went to put the flowers on the tomb of my parents,' Jean-Luc says. 'And I won forty races a year. We forgot the pain because we were in an atmosphere of joy. It allowed us to overcome the emotions.' Cycling has never stopped being the brothers' bond, a provider of pride and a sense of belonging, an outlet for feelings. Even in modern times, they call each other up as much for a post-mortem of a televised cycling race as to discuss family news.

Jean-Luc turned professional with leading French team Peugeot at the age of twenty in 1975. Within a year he was sprinting against

childhood idol Eddy Merckx for victory in Milan–San Remo and earmarked as a possible successor to the legend. While it didn't quite work out that way, Jean-Luc nevertheless had a long and successful career, especially strong in time-trials and one-day events. He won over seventy races, including stages of the week-long Paris–Nice and the prestigious Grand Prix des Nations time-trial.

Meanwhile, Chantal and Jean-Jacques had got married in August 1971 and taken over ownership of Ploegsteert's Hostellerie de la Place two months later from Chantal's parents, Emile and Magdalena. Since Jean-Jacques was still Jean-Luc's legal guardian, his prodigy brother had been obliged to move with him. He had got married and left as quickly as he reasonably could, disturbed by the noisy parties and the cries of Sandra, Chantal and Jean-Jacques' first-born, in 1972.

Blonde-haired, blue-eyed and bubbly, Chantal was the more gregarious one, running the business and chatting to punters. Jean-Jacques was more closed-off; the region's newspaper *Nord Eclair* once likened him to 'an old bear, taciturn and solitary'. He had spells as a plumber and heating engineer as well as helping out in the Hostellerie. His great pleasure was spending evenings above the restaurant, watching videos of old cycling races, carefully stacked next to a sizeable tank of snakes, his other hobby.

6 November 1974. In room 106 of Mouscron hospital's maternity ward, Chantal and Jean-Jacques' second-born entered the world, already fighting. His umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. The midwife took care of that, but minutes later his skin started turning blue and there was fear of hypoglycaemia. Amid the bleeps of the hospital machines, he rallied. He was a frail bundle, weighing 2.9kg, 20 per cent under the average birth weight of the time. That he was there at all was a little miracle: it had been thought that Chantal would not be able to give birth again.

Chantal wanted to call him Franck; Jean-Jacques wanted a tougher and more emphatic name without the ‘c’. He got his way, albeit haphazardly: on his trip to the registry office in the town hall in Mouscron, having conceded the ‘c’ to Chantal, he conveniently forgot to include it and the infant was registered as Frank Vandenbroucke.

He quickly gained the affections of the Hostellerie’s regulars, who would see his nappies being changed on the bar tables. Walking before his first birthday, he already exhibited a desire for adventure. One observant Ploegsteertois intercepted the youngest member of the family toddling down the road some 400 metres from his home, making a bid for Armentières over the French border.

This early breakaway attempt was an exception. Ploegsteert was Frank’s lodestar, exerting a magnetic pull on him even at the height of his career. His older sister Sandra has always lived there. I call in on her on a weekday evening. Freshly home from her job as a teacher, she is tall with dark brown hair and eyes, wearing a navy blue top and a chic pink scarf. Throw in her distinctive Vandenbroucke eyebrows, arched like a humpback bridge, and she reminds me of an older version of the title character in *Amélie*. She is something of an oddity within the family – a non-cyclist who hated the sport as a kid and never wanted to marry a rider, having seen the time it consumes. That didn’t exactly work out: her husband Sébastien was a footballer who took up the family obsession in his late thirties, and her son Franklin became a professional cyclist. His racing jerseys sit drying on the radiator as we talk.

Two years his senior, Sandra was immediately protective of Frank. With their parents often busy working, they were packed off to class as soon as possible. ‘I think I wasn’t even two, Frank was barely a year and a half old,’ Sandra says. ‘So it was a bit maternal in the playground: you can’t touch my younger brother. I wouldn’t leave him alone.’

Back then, the kids would gather after school in front of the Hostellerie on the village's main square, the Place de la Rabecque, and play football. The energetic little Frank would do laps on his black bicycle, gradually shaving milliseconds off his record.

Frank already had a flair for impersonation. On a trip to Lourdes during a family summer holiday, the toddler in his stroller put a blanket over his legs, imitating some of the elderly pilgrims visiting the Grotto, then rose up as if he'd been miraculously cured. This comedic knack would have peers in stitches later in life. His early health issues were no laughing matter, however, and he was visited occasionally by local nurses for respiratory problems.

But such health concerns paled in comparison to the events of 17 August 1979. A few months before his fifth birthday, Frank – or Frans, as the local newspaper erroneously stated in its nib the following day – went on his beloved bicycle with his father, who was meeting his friend Gilbert Barroo at four o'clock. There was a car rally race in Ploegsteert, and the Hostellerie was helping to arrange several drink stands.

Barroo lived on Rue Saint-Marie, a singletrack lane off the N365 main road that runs south through Ploegsteert towards France. It spirits drivers out to tilled fields of crops, grass and supine cows. It's only 1,500 metres from the Hostellerie; were it not for the twists and turns, you would be able to see across the grass to the village church. While his father popped in to see Barroo, little Frank kept pedalling.

An errant rally car getting in some final practice was haring down the narrow lane, the man behind the wheel under the impression that the pre-race training session was still on. That summer's day, the crop was high, obscuring the driver's view of the boy coming the other way till it was too late to avoid him. Hit by the car's wing, Frank was catapulted into the air.

The driver, Mario Reybrouck, tried the nearest house, but it had no telephone. He stayed with Frank while his co-pilot Freddy

Vangenot ran off to find one – straight to, of all places, the Hostellerie de la Place. Panting, he explained the predicament.

‘What was the boy wearing?’ Chantal asked.

‘A rainbow jersey,’ was the reply.

Her worst nightmare was realized.

Frank was rushed by ambulance to Notre Dame d’Ypres hospital. Legend has it he only started to cry when the doctor was about to cut his favourite cycling kit off with scissors; Chantal convinced them to slip it off him delicately. The diagnosis was a cerebral trauma and fractured left femur. It meant that he would be in hospital for six weeks. The local authority on orthopaedic trauma, Etienne Roussel, was away on holiday for a fortnight and his substitute, a specialist in appendiceal matters, devised a pulley-and-weight contraption that kept both legs raised vertically. Immobile, Frank briefly endured the indignity of using nappies until his mother devised Velcro trousers that could easily be opened and closed.

On his return, Roussel decided that the original method was madness: the bone needed to be broken and reset with the help of metal screws and a plate instead. However, the damage was done: Frank Vandembroucke’s left leg would grow to be considerably weaker, 1.7 centimetres shorter and two and a half thinner than his right. The accident’s ramifications would dog him during his professional cycling career, making his achievements and aesthetically pleasing style all the more remarkable.

In the short term, Frank had to learn to walk again. Several months later, his father presented him with a blue, custom-made bike – a half-size version of the dark green Motobecane ridden by his uncle Jean-Luc on the La Redoute professional team at the time. Before long, he was making his circuits in front of the Hostellerie de la Place again.

The bar where the family worked and lived sits in the centre of Ploegsteert, twenty paces from the church and set just back from

the roundabout where the village's two main roads converge. Back then, the Hostellerie was painted white, its smart estaminet and brickwork a beacon against the dark stone spire, the tallest thing around for kilometres.

The Vandenbrouckes no longer own it and the name has changed to the Café de la Grand Place, but little else is different. Behind the wood-panelled bar, used beer bottles are stacked on the wall, while Stella Artois, Carolus and the eponymous Queue de Charrue (the town's name in French) are on tap. In front of it, in the main restaurant area, are a dozen tables adorned with red-and-white chequered tablecloths. Through a door behind the bar is the large function room, popular for local parties and events. There are various kitschy signs and pithy bon mots dotted around the place too. One in particular catches my eye: *Mieux vaut les actes que les paroles* – actions speak louder than words.

Growing up there in the eighties, the air filled with cigarette smoke and the badinage of regulars, Frank and Sandra knew and mixed with everyone. Their meals were eaten in the restaurant area with paying customers; long-time waitress Marie-Paule Fauque-noit was even a nanny to the kids at times. 'We didn't have a family life. You went in, it was straight away the café, there was no place to hide away,' Sandra says. 'For breakfast, there would maybe be at least ten people at the table: you had us having breakfast before school, the person who worked at the post office drinking his coffee at seven in the morning, the man who worked at the insurance company was there too. The Café de la Place was just next to the local council office, so everyone would come in, even if the curtain was pulled across and it wasn't [officially] open.'

Up the grey-carpeted stairs, the children's individual bedrooms were all they had in the way of privacy. Even then, the creaky wooden floor in the old house meant any movement could be heard by the customers beneath. However, being bar kids did have its perks: Sandra and Frank had the key to the coin slot for the

pinball machine, so they could simply open it up and use the same Belgian franc piece to play over and over again.

Brother and sister shared an adventurous streak. When Frank was nine, they joined the circus together. After Chantal struck up conversation with a travelling German troupe, the families became friendly and the kids joined them for four days of shows around Flanders, helping to put on their acts, construct the tents and feed the snakes.

They surreptitiously smoked their first cigarette together in the neighbouring churchyard too. At the mention of this story, Sandra laughs and reveals another curious detail. 'I had my bedroom, with a two-person bed, and Frank had his own. But he didn't like to go to sleep all alone so he always slept with me. It was like that since we were little. It became a habit.' She says it stayed that way till she met her future husband Sébastien at the age of sixteen, when Frank was still thirteen. They were so close that Frank was the first person to know that she was in love with him.

Of course, they fought regularly too, as most siblings do. During one particularly rambunctious drive back from Mouscron, the bickering pair so annoyed Jean-Jacques that he pulled the car over and kicked them out a full 5km from the house to walk back the rest of the way. Told to go and pick his children up by a worried Chantal once she found out what he had done, he discovered them walking along the side of a country road with Sandra on Frank's back. The pair refused to get in the car and duly covered the remaining distance home on foot. The tale underlines another key trait of Frank's: stubbornness.

During the summer school holidays, kids often ruled the roost at the Hostellerie. Six years younger than Frank, Jean-Luc's daughter Céline would regularly come over from Mouscron to join the local group. 'For me, it was always a party over there. It was like I didn't have rules,' she says. 'I could go where I wanted, eat what I wanted. Chantal had a restaurant, if I wanted French fries all day

long, she said nothing! Every weekend I stayed, there was a wedding party and I used to go dance with the bride and groom.’

The spacious function room was their playground. There might be games of Monopoly, football or hide-and-seek in the dark. On occasion, Frank would hop on his bike and ride around the tables, or they’d put soap on the banisters and slide down. ‘Frank was quite charismatic, there was always a band of friends around him,’ Céline says. ‘[My cousin] Ophélie and I were the ones who did things with him. Sometimes he’d take us walking into the woods; we’d do so many kilometres without the right shoes on. We came back totally destroyed and cold. He was afraid of nothing. Nothing and nobody. If you said you wouldn’t go with him, he didn’t care . . . he did what he wanted.’

In his youth, Frank would take up lots of sports, show a little promise and drop them without warning. Judo, gymnastics, basketball and football bit the dust until he found a sport to stick with – running. On 19 March 1983, his fresh face pops up in the faded black-and-white news archives of the *Nord Eclair* in a report from the annual athletics meet that the regional newspaper sponsored around the Parc Communal in Mouscron. In a photo of the top three from the ‘Garçons 1974’ category, Frank stares into the camera, looking like he’s about to burst into tears after finishing runner-up to Karl Delbarge, several inches taller next to him. At the age of seven he had joined the EAH (Entente Athlétique du Hainaut) in neighbouring Le Bizet. His old coach Jacques Schouteten, a balding, bespectacled septuagenarian in a blue Nike T-shirt, still lives there and helps the club out. ‘He always wanted to win and he didn’t say a lot,’ Schouteten recalls of Vandembroucke. ‘But he wasn’t timid, not at all. He always wanted to go with the bigger kids. We did two training sessions a week, Wednesday and Friday evenings. But we knew that he did more, sometimes going running three or four times a week.’

The competitive youngster would do anything to ensure he