**From Ashes to Light**

Jean-Baptiste Alaize

with collaboration by Adeline Fleury

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Prologue

My room is already bathed in light. I feel good, lying on the bed, the sun warming my muscles. My body will be put through the mill again today. I don’t coddle it, I put it to the test. I always have. I stretch my muscles, wake them up with a little rub. I massage my thighs, my left calf. I run my hand across my abs, take a deep breath and let it out. I can feel the night breeze still warm on my torso. I reach my hand down to my right thigh, to the knee, and caress the roundness of my stump. Then I get moving.

Time to get my kit on. My leg is never far away. It’s resting at the foot of my bed. It isn’t connected to my body when I sleep, but it follows me everywhere. It’s always there for me. I know I can count on it, all the time, no matter what. My bionic leg. In the end, my prosthesis is a part of me; it’s not a foreign object. I can’t start my day without it. I attach it to the rest of my body, fit it to my thigh, adjust it to my stump. I’ve repeated these gestures every morning for years. It’s a mandatory ritual. I grew up with this extension of myself.

I sit up on the edge of my bed. My telephone vibrates. It’s 8 a.m. here in Miami, six hours ahead in France. It’s my mom. I write her that all is good. I spent the holidays far away from her and from dad. I swam in the ocean on Christmas day, a wonderful gift. The water was warm and turquoise. Absolutely delicious.

I miss my parents but they’re doing well. I feel reassured. I’m thousands of miles away but I check in with them several times a week. This damn virus still worries me, but I’ve seen other problems, and so have they. My dad is in a wheelchair now. He’s a survivor too. One car accident, two missing legs, 113 operations in 25 years, never a complaint. That’s a man. My father the hero. It’s a bit cliché, but I don’t have a better expression.

Mom is doing well, so is dad. I’m far away but I’m not a bad son. I know exactly how much I owe them. I owe them everything, or almost. If I’m here today in this apartment in Miami, it’s partly thanks to them. If I’m far away on the other side of the Atlantic, it’s because years ago they saved me from a destiny that was over before it began. I’ll never forget.

I was born in Burundi. Part of my family was massacred. I’ll never forget. My mother was decapitated before by eyes. I’ll never forget. Who could forget such atrocities? The machete blows, the bloodlust, the screaming, the wild eyes. My mother lying in a pool of blood. How could I forget? I lost my mother and my tibia to a machete. Growing up in Burundi with one leg was a life sentence of misery. A handicapped child in Burundi, one of the poorest countries in the world, is a double impediment. I know that I wouldn’t have made it.

The scars on my body tell my story. I look at myself in the mirror every morning. I face my past, and suppress none of it. I was struck four times on the right side of my body. I have scars on my neck, my side, my forearm, under my knee. Souvenirs gouged into my flesh that no longer cause me physical pain, but that remind me every day where I come from.

My scars are an incredible source of strength to me. I’m proud to show them; It’s a way to bear witness. I don’t hide them or my prosthesis anymore. I look at myself in the mirror and I see a tormented body, but not a handicapped one. My body doesn’t prevent me from flourishing and fulfilling my dreams.

My body made me a champion. You only have to look at my track record to see it: several sprint medals, in 100 and 200 meters; four-time junior world champion in long jump; world-record holder for under 23-year-olds from 2007 to 2010; bronze medal at the 2017 world championships and the European championships in 2018. I represented France at the Paralympic Games in London in 2012 and Rio in 2016, where I barely missed the podium. So, my body is not a handicap, quite the opposite. I am of the race of winners. But my goal in life is not winning for the sake of winning, but in order to bear witness, to become an ambassador, carry a message of hope, because you can live through hell, without being cut off from the light. This is my story, a story of redemption through sport, and also of redemption through love, that of my adoptive parents, Danielle and Robert Alaize. They are the heroes of this book as much as I am. Everyday heroes.

Part 1

SUFFER

I was born in Muyinga, a small town in northwestern Burundi not far from the border with Tanzania. I remember the lush greenery, the banana plantations, the surrounding hills that sometimes held onto white clouds as they passed by, the smell of red earth and citronelle, the flavor of juicy mangoes, mosquito bites, the ravages inflicted by termites. There were animals everywhere, cows, goats, chickens, and also monkeys. Further away in the forest, the gorillas growled. The adults were always warning us to watch out for gorillas so we didn’t wander too far from the houses. There was a little of everything in the area: huts made from dried clay and brick houses for those with a little more money, like my family. My father was an official in the Burundian army. He had some privileges, like that of driving around in a car. He was away from home a lot. Counting my dad, there were eight of us at home. I was always glued to my mother. My brothers and sisters walked to school while I went with mom to get water from the river. I seem to remember that we walked for a long time, but I didn’t get tired, not when I was with mom. We didn’t want for anything. I played, I had plenty to eat, and knew I was loved. We lived our lives far from the problems of the city, maintained our little corner of paradise far from the internal hatred and violence that was festering and spreading in the region. We didn’t have a TV, or a radio, or newspapers, and the rumors of massacres were so senseless that we didn’t believe them. It was much later when I learned about the coup d’etat against Melchoir Ndadaye, the Hutu president, or that Tutsi soldiers and Hutu rebels had been fighting since October 21, 1993, and that acts of violence were taking place in the streets of the country’s economic capital, Bujumbura, carried out by members of the Frodebu militia (the future CNDD\_FDD, in power today) and then throughout the country. The battle cry was launched: the Tutsi had to be exterminated. The mothers and children, everyone who fostered life. An ethnic group had to be eradicated. A genocide. I didn’t have time to feel the fear mounting, to allow war into my existence, it imposed itself on my life brutally, without warning.

Nothing could happen to me, Mugisha (my original name, in Burundi). Mugisha means “child of luck.” I was born under a lucky star. And when you’re three years old, you still believe in lucky stars. Nightmares don’t haunt you, yet.

I wish that what I lived through on October 24, 1993, had been a nightmare, that I could have woken up to find my mother holding me in her arms to comfort me, my sisters dancing and singing in the bedroom, and my brother doing gymnastics to make me laugh. Then we could have all gathered in front of house to watch the sun rise over the mountains, enchanted by the soft music of the birds that live by the millions in our hills.

The first thing that happened that afternoon was the silence. A worrying silence. I’d never heard silence like that before. The birds suddenly went quiet, the animals panicked and ran away. Next came a clamor from the roads outside of town, yelling and singing. I didn’t know whether it was joyous or threatening. I was playing in front of the house with my brothers and sisters. I wasn’t scared. I saw the guns, I saw the machetes. I heard “You’re all going to die!” I wondered if I wasn’t just imagining it all. The hoard passed in front of our house. They all looked crazed. Were they celebrating? Was it simply a protest? We didn’t know. Mom made us all come in the house. The situation calmed down. Surely everything was going to fall back into place. We would return to our daily life. My sister would help mom prepare the next meal. We would laugh, sing, and enjoy another happy and loving evening. I opened the window and stood there looking out, as I often did, my head resting on my hand.

Screams ripped me from my sweet daydream. Horrific screams, I had never heard sounds like that come out of a human mouth. I saw flames, bodies emerged from the fire. Women and children running, covered in blood, pursued by men who were drunk with rage. They were battering anything that moved with their machetes. Terrified, I held onto my mother for all I was worth. I didn’t know where the rest of the family was. Some Hutu neighbors crashed brutally into our home. Neighbors we had shared meals with just a few days before. The men were signing, their eyes rolled back in their heads from hatred. They were like possessed. Fury had taken control of them. The houses were burning, the fire was getting closer to us. Mother took me by the hand. We had to run. Outside it was darkest night. Through the flames I could see silhouettes running for their lives. We had to jump over corpses. I saw pregnant women gutted by men who never stopped laughing. I couldn’t recognize anyone, impossible to tell Tutsis from Hutus, impossible to distinguish good from evil. It wasn’t a game; This time, there really were good guys and bad guys, and the bad guys were after my mother and me. We had barely run 40 yards when five men encircled us. Two of them grabbed me and made me let go of my mother’s hand. They threw her to the ground, on her hands and knees. They made me watch. I heard my mom screaming my name, “Mugisha, Mugisha, Mugisha,” then I saw the machete strike her neck. Her head rolled to the ground. They let go of me. I rushed to her body, headless, lifeless. I threw myself on top of her to shield her. It was too late but I wanted to defend her. I wanted to protect my mother, like a little warrior. I tried to shelter her with my little arms. That’s when they attacked me, pummeling machete blows on my back. I don’t remember the pain. I was anesthetized by terror. I was only a three-year-old little boy, barely more than a baby. They kept hitting me, but I couldn’t let go of my mother. I didn’t want to leave without her. I was crying on her body. Then I pretended I was dead. I don’t know how long I stayed there like that, motionless on my mother’s corpse as it emptied itself of blood. I must have lost consciousness. I was awoken by a blow to the back of my neck. A buzzing in my ears prevented me from hearing the screams of other victims around me. I sat up, there was blood everywhere, a river of mixed blood, mine, my mother’s, other people’s. I tried to run away but I couldn’t feel my leg. I couldn’t drag it along. So I lay down next to my mom. I could still see the killings. The hallucinated executioners, the stunned victims, fear everywhere. So I closed my eyes. I was huddled against my mother’s body. I saw the tunnel, and at the end it, the sun. It was my mother’s smile. I was ready to go with her.

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I don’t know the difference between a Hutu and a Tutsi, I only know the cliches that circulate about them. Apparently, the Hutus and Tutsis are physically different. They say that Tutsis are tall and slender while Hutus are short and stocky. Supposedly, these physical characteristics result from the fact that the former cultivate the land while the latter raise animals. I am Tutsi. I am tall and slender but I don’t remember my Hutu neighbors being any stockier than me, or worse, that they had big noses, like they say in my country. It’s true I was too young to remember, but later, when I arrived in France, I was raised with a Hutu boy, my adopted brother. My French parents adopted a young Rwandan before me, who they baptized Julien. By a twist of fate, he is Hutu and I am Tutsi. We never noticed the slightest difference between us, nor did our parents. Different personalities, of course, but absolutely nothing that is linked to our ethnic origins. I am restless and lively, and I like to be in the spotlight. Julien is calm, reserved, always discreet. But Julien and I are brothers. If we fought as children, it was as brothers. When Julien locked me in the closet with a cloth in my mouth, it wasn’t because I was Tutsi, it was just that he was a little jealous of the attention our adoptive mother gave me, since I was the last to arrive and I was missing a leg. I learned later that when I appearned, my handicap upset him. He asked Danielle, “Mom, why isn’t my little brother whole?” I can understand his question. I don’t know how I would have reacted in his place.

He also experienced the war, the violence, but we never talked about it, as if by tacit agreement, a nonaggression pact. His family isn’t responsible for massacring mine. Human folly is to blame, the brutality that has bathed the Great Lakes region of Africa in blood for decades.

Our two histories overlapped in a family in the Drome, thousands of miles away from our neighboring home countries. The Tutsi genocide ravaged Rwanda a few months after Burundi. Julien arrived in the Alaize home in 1994, a few weeks before the massacres began. But tensions were already high when Robert and Danielle went to pick him up. They took risks to help him, just like Robert did for me a few years later. I don’t know much of Julien’s story. If I openly recount mine, my brother’s words are locked away. I now know that he still has two brothers and three sisters in Rwanda. In 2007, we went there with our adopted mother. Very few images from that trip have stuck in my mind, even though it was the first time I returned to African soil. I just remember the hot and humid breeze at the Kigali airport, the smell of eucalyptus and acacia in the village where Julien was born, nestled in the mountains, similar to the sensations of my early childhood. Danielle offered to take advantage of the trip to retrace my origins in neighboring Burundi, but I wasn’t ready yet. I wanted to accomplish big things before I went back. It was still too early.

If I quickly confided my whole story to Julien, he again kept his secrets to himself during this trip. Though he was slowly reacquainting himself with his roots, he never felt the need to tell the story of his past. If we lived through similar traumas, neither of us let the violence take over our lives. We both escaped from the hatred of two very similar peoples. The blood of a suffering Africa runs in our veins but our adoptive parents’ love tamed our demons. We are two Alaize boys, brothers of the heart.

Julien came to see me at the 2016 Paralympics in Rio. After the competition, we took a few days’ vacation in Brazil. We wandered the streets of Rio de Janiero, talking little. Julien stopped and said to me, “I love you a lot, little brother.” Without getting sappy, I simply told him, “We’re going after the highest peace medals, you and I.”

Part 3

RUN

I sat tall and proud on my white horse. My mount was calm. I had never been more elegant than sitting there in my riding costume with my impeccable boots, a velvet-covered bomb helmet, and navy-blue jacket. But I was scared. The competition had started and it would soon be my turn. I was always nervous before entering the ring.

I discovered riding thanks to Charlie, the incredible connection with the horse, the energy those animals can transmit. I started out riding ponies and in just a few months progressed up to horses. I literally threw myself into the sport because it calmed me and challenged me at the same time. The doctors told my parents that it would be good therapy. Soon I was going to the riding club twice a week. And because I’m naturally competitive, I passed my “gallops,” the tests that allow you passage to higher levels of equitation, and every weekend I competed in horse shows, first on a pony named Eureka, and then a mare called Mahe. I was hooked. I loved swashbuckling films and took myself for a knight in shining armor. I did show-jumping, dressage, and even played horse-ball. It wasn’t easy with my prosthesis in the stirrup, but nobody even noticed my handicap until one day during a horse-ball match when my prosthesis came off. The public had quite a scare, but no real harm was done. I was always a daredevil and an adrenalin junkie.

I was the only black kid in that environment, which put me under incredible pressure. Again, I wanted to outdo the others. I wanted to surpass them and surpass myself. I thought back to the first competition when I was afraid to enter the ring. Charlie had to motivate me when I was ready to abandon for the wrong reasons.

-- Charlie, people in the public are going to make fun of me, aren’t they?

That made my friend mad.

-- I thought you dreamed of competing here, you wanted to show them who you are, what you’re made of!

-- But the others have been doing this since they were little kids.

-- You’re going to show them what you’ve learned in such a short time. They’ll be jealous and nobody will dare to open their mouth. Go on, get out there! No one can even see your leg.

-- You know I don’t want to talk about that, so stop!

My name echoed through the speakers.

-- Jean-Baptiste Alaize, last call…

I risked disqualification at every competition.

Sitting there on my horse, several months after my first competition, I played back the obstacle course in my head. My concentration was intense. Like always, I searched for Danielle and Robert’s eyes. Like always, mom gave me a little wave. I saluted the judge’s tribune and began slowly. The mare hesitated on the first gate, and picked up speed on the next two, skimming the bars and almost knocking them down. I pressed my thumbs into the reins. The mare collected herself and together we flew over the rest of the bars, executing a beautiful perfect run. The entire tribune applauded our performance. It was magical. I had realized the best time in my category. When I held my trophy up to the sky, toward Charlie and toward my parents, I felt I had the soul of a champion.

When I competed, I did it to win.

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“Your leg is amazing!” In my adult life, I’ve heard reactions like this much more often than the opposite. It has never been a problem as far as dating and intimacy. I was popular at parties and in class, I made the girls laugh. I was a player. I remember my first kiss, at summer camp in the Carmargue. It was a four-wheel and horseback riding camp. It was hot, humid, and rife with mosquitos. It was an awkward first kiss, but still a first kiss. Later I had crushes, adventures, girlfriends. I was with my first real girlfriend for five years, all through high-school and when I started at INSEP. Her name was Manon. We would go on vacation together, it was fusional. But life separated us. The distance made it hard to continue our relationship, but there wasn’t a single moment in which my handicap posed a problem for her. Since then, I’ve been lucky to meet other girls, and then young women, who brush aside prejudices.

Following some difficult months in middle school when I hid my leg, I started to accept myself as I was. Once I came to terms with how others looked at me, whether kindly or hateful, I started loving my body. I realized that I was lucky to have a powerful body, full of muscle, and that sports would take me far. I had success models. I was a fan of Carl Lewis. When I saw him run for the first time on TV, I knew right away that I wanted to be like him, this athlete who had extraordinary beauty, a rare elegance, who excelled both in sprint and long jump.

He was an example, an inspiration for the little boy I was at the time, who nurtured dreams of the spotlight. And it’s not because I had one less leg that I was going to give up on my dream. Thanks to my prothesis I am whole, I feel good about myself. I couldn’t do anything about my skin color to combat the racism, but despite my handicap, I could excel at sports. So, all my life, I ran to get away from those who wanted to kill me. All my life, I felt like a target, and that’s why I run.

Run to escape, run to be reborn, run to exist.

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And so, I started running. Once around, twice around, three times… without stopping. My gym teacher at school had recommended a track and field club not far from Montelimar. The coach asked me to run around the track a few times to test my endurance, observe my stride, judge my racing level. I naturally hugged the track. It was an incredible feeling, in full awareness of my body. The warm air enveloped my muscles in a reassuring softness. I started out in small strides that got longer and longer with each lap. Four, five, six...I didn’t slow down at all. I felt no pain. My breathing intensified as I ran. Seven, eight, nine… I drew on unknown reserves. I was flying. It’s like my feet weren’t even touching the ground. Ten, eleven, twelve… my chest started to prickle. I couldn’t feel my legs. My mind was totally empty. It was like a drug-induced high. I don’t know how many times I circled the track or how long the workout lasted. Finally, I let my body fall to the ground. I was exhausted, emptied, but so good. All I wanted was to start over, relive that feeling of plenitude, again and again, to recapture that mix of adrenaline, my heart pounding in my chest, all my senses maxed out, a desire to laugh, run, and cry all at the same time, to test my limits, and push them, and above all to forget, forget reality, forget my handicap, forget Africa and the massacre, forget the past by forgetting myself as I ran. Forget myself and find myself. It was equally dizzying and exhilarating.

In that stadium in the south of France, the 13-year-old adolescent that I had become, who swore to hide the secret of his lost leg from his classmates, who always wore long pants no matter how hot the weather, who orchestrated everything to keep his leg hidden, discovered the superhero inside himself.

One day, he would be able to run like his idol, Carl Lewis, and why not win medals, participate in the Olympics. Those unbridled laps around the track changed my destiny. As I ran, I saw flashes from the past. I saw the scene with my mother. I felt like I was running toward something, for something. I felt as free as a horse that’s let out to gallop in the fields. This would be my therapy. I understood that I would no longer be a black, handicapped little boy. I wanted to become one of the world’s top athletes, to wear the French national-team jersey in an Olympic stadium.

The coach came over to me. I was only slightly short of breath and gleaming with sweat. I was lying on the track and staring up into the blue sky. I felt good. He helped me up, and shook my hand like a man, a firm and self-assured handshake.

-- Kid, you are champion material. You’ll go far. Whatever you do, don’t ever stop running!

So my gym teacher was right, I had a gift. He had spotted me several weeks earlier at the high-school track meet.

I was in the 4 x 100 meter relay for my class, in the strategic position of anchor. It was a huge responsibility; I could not mess this up. When the baton was handed off to me, we were last, but I ran like the wind and caught up with everyone, and we won. I had a flash. I felt sure that a vital part of me was invested in this race, that I had to prove I was the best. I gritted my teeth and let out a kind of roar that allowed me take off with all my might. One by one I passed all the other runners, I felt incredibly strong.

No one knew I had a prosthesis, and I had beat able-bodied runners. Inside, I was jubilant. What a stupendous revenge on life, the “dirty nigger” the “jungle bunny” who was so often mocked by his classmates, ran faster than any of them and handed up a victory to the entire class, including the ones who looked down on me.

It was chaos in the locker room, the kids were huddled together to celebrate our medal, they were signing and yelling, it was a celebration. I stayed off to the side, jumping around on my leg. The teacher came over to see me.

-Alaize, you have incredible talent that I’ve rarely seen in junior high. But why are you jumping on one foot? What are you hiding under your sweat pants?

- Nothing, sir.

- Yes you are. I can see it. Show me.

- Sir, I’m handicapped, I’m missing a tibia. I have a prosthesis in the place of my right calf. I don’t want anyone to know.

-- That’s enough Jean-Baptiste, follow me. I’m going to teach this thickheaded band of kids a lesson in life.

The teacher called for silence in the room, he had something important to say.

-- All of you shut up now! Everyone huddle in, Jean-Baptiste is going to show you something. I approached shyly and stood in the middle of the circle; the apprehension felt like a brick in my stomach. I was a little bit ashamed but I understood what the teacher was trying to demonstrate. It was my victory, not theirs. I was the reason we won. I had the right to be in the spotlight, I was legitimate. I suddenly felt a wave of confidence burst inside me. I pulled up the leg of my sweatpants and revealed my prosthesis to the oohs and aahs, and astonished looks of my classmates.

-- Look, Jean-Baptiste has a handicap, but that doesn’t keep him from living a normal life, and more than that, from being very strong! He has one leg, and even so, he still won the race. You should all respect him. He is black and handicapped, don’t judge him or push him aside. He gave you this victory. Take him as an example.

I wanted to be discreet, but his message was so strong that it was like a dam bursting. My classmates knew that I was different and that despite this difference, I could run fast and be like everyone else, and that my heart was in the right place.

Later, my teacher gave me the address of a track club in Montelimar. That’s how I found myself running endless laps around the track on that hot spring afternoon.

That night, for the first time since my mother was killed, I didn’t have a single nightmare. I had seen the lion, but this time his paws weren’t covered in blood.

And I slept in peace.