

Tailor

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I remember quite clearly the moment I first heard an episode from Rufus Arkoï's story. Not the familiar tale that he told to whomever came to see him in New York – of the street corner gangsters he recruited into his sports club, or the child soldiers he turned into soccer players – but *his own* story.

We were sitting together in his centre one winter's evening speaking of nothing in particular. The children were filling in the big square blocks of a puzzle, while the old folk were practising their alphabet.

'Did I tell you that I was a tailor in Liberia?' Rufus asked, apropos of nothing at all. 'I *sew* real well. I sew *real* well.'

He tugged at his sleeve. 'This tracksuit top: I could make one as good as this. Put on a zipper. Finish it off. No different from the one in the store. In Liberia, it was a business. I was *19 ... years ... old ...* and I was making kits for the national soccer team, for the national basketball team. I was making *money*. A *lot* of money.'

Tailoring came up once more a few weeks later. We were in the middle of a formal interview. I had put on my voice recorder and asked him to speak of his childhood in Liberia. He was talking of soccer, of how his youth was soccer, soccer, soccer, and I asked him whether he was a goal scorer.

'No,' he replied. 'Scoring was not one of the things I looked forward to in playing. I made plays. I supported the forwards, the main feeder connecting the goalie and the defenders to the forwards. I made a lot of goals, a lot of goals. I was an entertaining human being.'

He had slid, quite seamlessly, between one's quality as a footballer and one's quality as a person, and as I noted this to myself, he began telling me of his big injury.

'It was in 1979. I was still in high school. The injury lasted for a year and a half. My knee. I was practising for a game with a rival Catholic school. The field we were practising on was very bad. I was looking for a ball in the air. My leg went into water. My whole knee was twisted. From the erosion in the field.

'That was the end of playing for me. When I eventually went back, I was so scared. I didn't want a collision. I didn't want my knee to be touched. It wasn't properly healed.'

'Is that when you went to tailoring school?' I asked.

'No. Oh no. I went to tailoring school when I was 11 years old. I graduated when I was 14. I graduated from designing school at the age of 14; I could make a *suit*.'

'What took you to tailoring school at that age?' I asked.

He shifted in his seat, throwing his shoulder into the story. He must have been telling it for the umpteenth time, but the satisfaction in his face suggested that it was as fresh as it ever had been.

‘My father, you know, he was a funny guy. He didn’t know how to handle me: how to handle my *explosion*. I just grew very, you know, *ambitious*. At age 10, 11, I mean.

‘Put it like this. The principal walked in and told my father to keep me at home for a while. I was just too *smart*. They couldn’t *deal* with me. I mean, I was not *normal*, I was above normal growing up. Every year, people get one promotion, I had to get double promotion. I didn’t go to second grade or fourth grade. Principal said, “No! Stop him! Where is he going?” The school wanted me to stay back. I had no control over it.

‘My father was looking around for something to *contain* me, something to *slow me down*. Something is not right with this boy. Let me slow him by challenging him to sew. So, he sent me to an old guy, an old tailor, and bought me a brand new machine, at the age of 11.

‘Old guy said, ‘What are you bringing...?’

‘My father said, “Look, this guy is all over the place; he’s doing all kinds of stuff. I want to get him busy.”

‘At 12 and a half, 13, I became the primary helper of this old guy. I increased his production over 200 per cent. I increased his income. This old guy, relying on this 13-year old to hem skirts, to press clothes, to put on buttons.’

‘You did all this after school?’ I asked.

‘All after school hours. I got home at 1:30, had to be in the shop by 2 o’clock. Stayed in the shop ’til 5, 5:30. Soccer went on between 5 and 7. So between 2 and 5, I focus on that. Then I’d say to the old man, ‘I need to go and play soccer.’

‘He’d say, “Your father don’t want you to play too much soccer.”

‘I say, “I need to go play.”

‘He say, “Listen, go play, make sure you back by 7, so we can lock up the shop.”’

People began walking into Rufus’ centre and it became rude to continue. I switched off the voice recorder and we started talking of other things. Sometime later in the evening, I mentioned Rufus’s tailoring in passing. He frowned and grew distracted and a niggling expression came over his face, as if the way I was speaking of his story demonstrated that I hadn’t understood its significance.

‘The design for the soccer kit,’ he said, ‘it came to me in a dream. The old man and I had been thinking, thinking, thinking, for days on end. How do you *do* this? There was no one to *guide* us, no design to *copy*. You know, the neck, the v-line; it is so hard to make it so that it doesn’t wrinkle. Some use an iron to hide the crinkle. But you can see that immediately. And then it came to me in my *sleep*, how to do it. The whole thing, the neck, the sleeves. I woke up. I went straight to the workshop. It’s working! It’s working! The next day, I show the old man a *soccer kit*.

‘He says, “Who taught you this?”
‘No. It came in a *dream*.’

He sat back in his chair and looked at me, and I nodded and smiled, and now his brow creased in frustration. I still didn’t get it. He stood up, as if the weight of his point required him to throw his entire body into it, and as he spoke, he gesticulated with arms scooped in front of him.

‘This was *Liberia*. Nobody had ever made a soccer kit in the whole *country*. Always, since the beginning, our kits had to be *imported*. There was no *precedent*. There was nobody to go to and *ask*. That is why I became *rich*.’

Rufus’ childhood began in Bomi Hills, a town some 40km from Monrovia. That is where he was living when his father, Joseph Arkoi, sent him to the old man to learn to sew, and where he began playing soccer. Joseph Arkoi was an indigenous Liberian, a Loma, and a blue-collar man: he was a driver, employed at a hospital, which, along with practically every other institution in the town, was owned by the Liberian Mining Company, the country’s first exporter of iron ore. The Company paid very well by the standards of Liberian blue-collar labour, its employees constituting something of a privileged guild. Joseph Arkoi’s success would show in the size of his family – he would have 14 children, borne by several wives – and in the fact that he would save enough money for one of these children to attend an elite Catholic school.

When Rufus was 14, the Liberian Mining Company closed down, and much of Bomi Hills with it. Arkoi Senior began the monumental task of relocating his family to Monrovia. Rufus was among the first Arkois to go: he was sent to live with his older brother in a house the family was building, and to attend St Patricks School, among the best in Monrovia. Why Joseph chose Rufus for this privilege, Rufus says he does not know. The house into which the Arkoi family would move was in an area where not a single other child went to a private school. It stood on Twelfth Street in the suburb of Sinkor.

Were two Monrovians to meet on the street and fall to talking some time in the 1970s, and were one to remark that he lived in Sinkor, the other would immediately know, on the basis of his interlocutor’s speech and dress, on which side of William VS Tubman Boulevard he lived: coastside, or landside. The piece of Sinkor that fell between Tubman Boulevard and the sea was wealthy. Today, decades of war have scrambled the city’s social geography and coastside is no longer universally rich. But you can see from its architecture what it once was: the houses set far back from the road, high walls, the remnants of ornate landscaping; one imagines homes full of heirlooms and the portraits of dead patriarchs.

Landside was another world. It was inhabited primarily by country people, rather than by Americo-Liberians, and primarily by people of modest means. Yet it was also sought after, for in the middle of landside, on Twelfth Street, was William VS Tubman High School, among the very few public schools in Monrovia reputed to be very good. Tubman High would educate several of the men who went on to topple the country’s last Americo-Liberian government.

A visitor walking along Twelfth Street, his back to the coast, soon passes the buildings of Tubman High on his left. Whatever the time of year, it is hot, 32C on a mild day, and the sunlight is stark and punishing. A block or so later, the road narrows without warning and becomes a pedestrian passageway. Today it is lined with market stalls at which hawkers sell potato greens, fresh chilli and fish; when Rufus first saw it, it was empty. Some 50 or so paces on, the passageway breaks into several forks and the visitor suddenly finds that he is in a labyrinth, the houses built close together and on the very verges of the paths. The labyrinth seems to shut behind you as you walk. The rest of Sinkor is gone, the harsh sunlight is muted and you sense that you are in another place now, with its own damp smells and echoing voices. This is where Rufus lived.

To understand how this labyrinth came to be, you must keep walking. For once you come out the other side you are suddenly in marshland, the mangrove-like reeds chest-high, the squelching of mud underfoot. Sinkor is a very old settlement: the Vai lived here long before the Americo-Liberians arrived. But in all its history, nobody bothered to build on this particular piece of land before Rufus's family and their ilk arrived. It was far too close to the marsh.

That is how the Twelfth Street labyrinth came to be. Nobody else wanted it. And so, in the mid-1970s, poor people migrating from the countryside to Monrovia began to put up houses there. The government gave up the land for nothing.

The Arkois seem to have forgotten how Rufus' father came to hear of the Sinkor marshland. They remember only that he sent his wife's younger brother to Monrovia to occupy a piece of ground and begin construction. The brother-in-law's name was Joseph Wayfather Saykor, a gaunt, wheezing, visibly ailing man who wore only a pair of shorts and sat on a bench in the shadow of the house he had built. I interviewed him eight days before his death,

'This was a free place,' he told me, 'a government place, not a private place. We never bought it. The thing you had to do is, you had to put something down so that another family would not take the piece of land you had chosen. So we put up a shack, and we slowly built the house around the shack, little by little.'

People from across Liberia built on this marshland, and it became a truly cosmopolitan place, one of many languages and ethnicities. A family from Ghana even came here: the Frederickses. They built a house right in the middle of the marsh, on an island one approaches on a rickety bridge, the sludge not far beneath one's feet. The island became known as Fredericks Island, and the old matriarch who built the place with her husband still lives there. Rufus was to grow very close to her sons.

When I interviewed the dying Saykor, he had, resting on his lap, two photographs, each in an ancient frame. The first was a portrait of himself as a young man, his face very strong, his eyes boring into the camera lens with a look that bordered on ferocity. The other was a group photograph of a soccer team.

'Can you tell me which is Rufus?' he asked, smiling weakly.

He was instantly recognisable – half his current size, to be sure, his leanness and narrowness something of shock when one considers how much he now invests in his heft – but the eyes, the strong curve in the upper lip, were Rufus through and through.

Saykor took me into the house. A dark corridor bisected it, four rooms on either side. Each, I imagined, had housed a son or a daughter together with an entire nuclear family; the house's architect had squeezed as many spaces of privacy as its confines would allow. It had about it the air of a place that had once thrived, but had long fallen into disrepair. The ceiling was grey and rotting and missing in places, and the walls had clearly not seen a coat of paint in many years.

At the end of the house, the corridor opened into a room, the only one almost as wide as the building itself.

'This was Rufus' sewing room,' Saykor said, almost with reverence. He paused, looked around, took the place in. 'Rufus sat *here*, his machine on *this* table. Ben Fredericks sat *here*, and his brother sat *here*, and his cousin Frederick Richardson sat *here*. You see, whoever wanted to find Rufus knew he would be here. And the boys came. Rufus was a magnet. People wanted to be around him. By being with him, they learned to sew. And when they learned to sew, their lives changed.'

As I lingered around Twelfth Street over the following days, the meaning of Rufus's sewing slowly became clear. A great deal had changed because of the war; most of the people one met on the street had not lived here more than a few years, and the name Rufus Arkoi meant nothing to them. But everyone who had been here in the 1970s knew of him. Even people in their early 20s – born at the time Rufus left for the United States – if their parents had come of age on Twelfth Street, then they had heard of Rufus Arkoi.

'Wasn't he a tailor?' a young writer called Aaron Weah asked me. Aaron had just told me that he grew up on Twelfth Street, and I immediately asked if he knew of Rufus. 'Wasn't he a tailor and the owner of a football club? I heard his name a lot when I was small.'

The boys in the Twelfth Street labyrinth were poor, the sons of outsiders who had built homes on a marsh in a city whose wealth they had no right to claim. The boys came to Rufus while he sewed, through his friendship they learnt to sew too, and from sewing they began to inhabit improbable futures.

'George Fredericks became a tailor and taught tailoring at Don Bosco Polytechnic,' Saykor told me, counting off his long fingers the ghosts of those who had occupied Rufus's sewing room. 'Kpada went to Nigeria and sewed for a living there. Jesse Cooper prospered as a tailor. They all made a living in this line.'

At his centre in Staten Island, surrounded by his unruly toddlers and his ageing students, Rufus had spoken of his sewing as if he were a conjurer of magic. I had felt a twinge of embarrassment, wondering whether he was making himself foolish. But there are people on Twelfth Street who knew of his sewing room as a magical place for a bunch of boys gathered there in the afternoons after school, and each walked out with a career.

The bare bones of Rufus' soccer story are simple in the telling. It was the beginning of 1980, he was 17 years old and had just finished high school. There were many soccer clubs in his section of Monrovia. One of them approached him to be their president.

'Why they brought me in?' Rufus asks. 'Being a tailor at a young age, I made lots of suits for myself. I dressed *well* as a young boy. I dressed very, very well. That was appealing to people.'

In my mind, I see the young Rufus swaggering out of the labyrinth into the blunt sunlight on Twelfth Street, a bowler hat low on his brow, a good suit tailored close to his lean frame. His nonchalance is studied, but out of the corner of his eye he watches surreptitiously for the heads he has turned. 'Who *is* that man,' he imagines people wondering.

'So this team brought me in,' he continues. 'That was a development I will never be able to measure in my life. What it did for me is immeasurable.'

The team was called the Eleven Eagles. It was a junior team, the players in their mid and late teens.

'There was always a problem with space in Sinkor,' Rufus recalls. 'Many, many teams, not enough fields. As a junior team, we always lost out. When the older guys were playing you couldn't play. And the older guys were *always* playing. So, either you play very early, or very late.'

And so a familiarly heroic tale begins. Scratching out time and space in the margins of Sinkor soccer, the Eleven Eagles grow very disciplined and very good. For a year, they nurture their growing talent, unseen, unnoticed. And then, out of nowhere, they spring: they pick on the very best of the older teams, the Massive Invincible Eleven, and challenge them to a duel.

‘The game was set down for a holiday,’ Rufus says. ‘I haven’t got involved in a soccer game like that ever again in my life. On that day, if you were a criminal, you could walk into Sinkor and take what you like. You could walk into anyone’s home. The town was empty. Everyone was at the game. There had never been a game so emotional on the Tubman field on Twelfth Street. My side won 2-1; we won 2-1.’

And so Rufus tasted glory twice on Twelfth Street, first as a tailor, then as the president of a soccer club. He had become a young man associated with the audacious, the sort in whose trail others wished to walk. But there was trouble ahead.

‘This was 1981,’ Rufus continued. ‘There was a tendency at the time for people to overthrow government. Everywhere: in school, in the soccer clubs. Because a year earlier people had seen the government of Liberia overthrown.’

‘A young man set up a coup against me in Eleven Eagles in May 1981. So, I got the news, “Rufus, you have been overthrown”. I was very wounded. I was too wounded to fight back. I said, “Fine, I’m sick and tired of this.”’

‘A group of guys from the club got together. They said, “Rufus, you must fight this coup. Look, you built the team from nothing. We were nowhere before you came.”’

‘I said, “Yeah, but this is a revolution. I have to go.”’

‘So these guys around me said: “Rufus, if you go, we are not staying.” They said, “Why don’t you form your own team?”’

‘I said, “Are you serious?”’

‘They said, “If you don’t do it, no one will do it.”’

‘We started throwing out names for our new club. We threw out all sorts of names. One of them said Roza, the initials of my name: Rufus O Zumo Arkoi. Everyone was, “*Yeah*”. It sounds like a soccer team. *Roza*.”’

‘On June 9, 1981 we founded Roza. Eighty per cent of the guys from the Eleven Eagles came on. I sewed the uniform. We started playing games. We played our first 11 games undefeated.’

Rufus has left out what is surely the most important part of the story. He could have a club named after him because he could pay for its upkeep, and he could pay for its upkeep because of his success as a tailor. Already, from his earliest days, he was turning the magic he sewed in his father’s front room into a public legacy, an institution that would bear his name and refigure the world in some way.

Sinkor was home to several dozen soccer teams, but only two soccer fields. There was no system, no co-ordination. The president of Roza would meet the president of Executive Eleven on the street, and agree to play at 4pm on Sunday at Tubman High. The two teams would assemble at the venue, only to find that five other matches were scheduled for the same time on the same field.

‘Nobody ended up playing,’ Rufus recalled, ‘because nobody had a right to the field. After the second time this happened to us, I said, “Listen, we can’t allow this to go on: we need a broader organisation.” This was the beginning of 1982. I said, “We all need to come together to communicate who will play on the field when.”’

‘We formed the Sinkor United Sports Organisation, Susa. It is still in existence today. It covered the area from the border of Congo Town to the German Embassy. Within that area, you had more than 50 soccer teams: 50 teams that thousands of young men looked up to. We broke the teams down into divisions, into leagues. The excitement that this new form of competition created throughout Sinkor: you walked down the street, it was the *only* thing people were talking about. “Eagles are a point behind Roza, and playing them at 3pm tomorrow. Wow! Wow!” Sinkor had never known something like this.

‘News got around. Other parts of Monrovia wanted the same excitement. The model was the first of its kind in the Liberian Football Association’s history. People saw the model. Said,

“This is gen-i-u-s.” The Association came to see me. How did he build? How did he? How? They took the model away and implemented it in other areas.’

And there the story might have ended, were it not for the fact that Samuel K. Doe’s People’s Redemption Council had at this stage been governing Liberia for more than a year. By now, Doe was dimly aware that he could not run Liberia as a united nation. And he was acutely aware that he trusted nobody enough to run it for him. What he could do, though, undeniably and with great accomplishment, was play soccer.

Long before his name became known throughout the rest of the country, Doe was an accomplished soccer player in his home county, Grand Gedeh, a goal maker like Rufus, as skilled with his left boot as with his right. Doe knew that young men across Liberia were mesmerised by soccer, and that the Congo Town elite had always looked down upon it, encouraging its own young men to play American basketball. The very spectacle of a soccer player governing the country was perhaps the most convincing evidence available that the old regime was dead. And so, improbably, Doe at times fancied that he might govern Liberia through soccer. Under his rule, the boundary between soccer and politics, indeed, between soccer and the world, began to blur.

To be fair, the old regime had dipped a cautious toe into the world of soccer, but in a manner that only pronounced its distaste. In the 1950s, when President William Tubman was accruing clients and allies among indigenous chiefs, there was much talk of building a united Liberian nation. The statues depicting the founding of Liberia no longer showed black American discoverers hoisting a flag over a landscape won by conquest. Instead, a man in a morning coat shakes hands with a man clad in a loin cloth, their meeting taking place under the aegis of a priest. The two parties appear to be equals.

In much the same spirit, Tubman began taking an interest in soccer. He began to invest lavishly in Liberia’s only elite-dominated team, the Invincible Eleven, or, simply, IE – founded in the 1940s in Monrovia’s elite high school, the College of West Africa, where Azariah Sirleaf would study – and charged it with the task of thumping the indigenes soundly. Educated indigenous Liberians involved in radical politics supported Mighty Barolle, a team for which the elite did not care much. The rest of the sides in the national league were little more than fill-ins: Firestone ran a team, and each county mustered together a side. But the significant rivalry was between IE and Barolle. The elite supported the former, those who wanted to overthrow the elite supported the latter, and when the two sides clashed, the stadium was filled with thoughts of treason.

On an afternoon in early November 2008, I met a man who had watched Doe govern Liberia from close quarters. His name is Reverend Emmanuel Bowier. Doe appointed him Deputy Information Minister a few weeks after coming to power. By virtue of serial feats of expedience and wiliness, Bowier managed to remain in Doe’s cabinet almost until the end. It was only in 1989 that he fell out of Doe’s favour and repaired hastily across the border, an execution warrant following not far behind.

‘It is hard to describe the transformation of the meaning of soccer from the day Doe came to power,’ Bowier told me. ‘Under the old regime, it remained a poor boys’ game with nowhere to go, a game of the street. With Doe, soccer is suddenly touched with the magic of state power. The big teams are now transported to their matches in the presidential Cadillac. The Liberian national team, the Lone Stars, get a foreign coach. And when they have a home game, there is a national holiday. Nobody goes to work.

‘Before, there was no money in soccer. Now, Doe builds a housing estate for the national team. And the Liberian Football Association, before, it was run on a shoestring. Now, Doe throws a million dollars at it. All of a sudden, to be a soccer administrator is a very big deal. There

are several very powerful men in this country who rose because they happened to be in soccer administration in 1980.'

It was more than simply a question of elevating soccer. The sport became personally connected to the president in ways that were almost mystical.

'Say a big game was coming up,' I was told by a man named Barent Karr, who has been playing and coaching neighbourhood soccer in Sinkor since the 1970s, 'A clash, say, between IE and Barolle. And say that on the eve of the game, one of the star players is injured. It is imperative that the president be informed. A presidential car comes to the player's house to take him to executive mansion. Doe receives him, and asks to see the injury. Then he puts the player's injured leg on his lap – to give him courage and inspiration, to heal him.

'It was impossible for a big game to kick off if President Doe had not yet arrived at the stadium,' Karr continued. 'If the President was late, the game must wait. It was as if soccer was only made possible by the fact that the President watched it.'

By the end of 1985, after he had brutally put down the Quiwonkpa coup, effectively turning the populations of entire counties into permanent enemies, Doe probably knew that he was incapable of ever running Liberia peaceably. Tubman's political accomplishment was to have centralised power in his office. Doe could only imagine what that must feel like. Inside and outside his government were growing centres of power he could neither control nor trust, and whose workings were increasingly opaque to him. According to Bowier, soccer became his refuge.

'It became a way for him to escape the realities of power,' Bowier told me. 'It allowed him to relax. Until he finally joined the Freemasons in 1988, soccer was really his only contact with Liberians outside his own ethnic group. It was a non-security issue. It was non-threatening.'

Perhaps rather than a refuge from, it was a substitute for the exercise of power. The things Doe began doing with soccer smack of panic, of unseemly urgency. He genuinely seems to have confused the business of political governance with sport.

'Every cabinet minister and his wife had to support a soccer team,' Bowier said. 'That meant you had to put down what you were doing and attend all of their games. Never mind that you are abroad on government business. You make sure you are back in Liberia for the weekend when your team is playing. If Doe sees that you are only pretending, that your interest in sport is faked, your political career is finished.

'Go and speak to a man called Peter Jallah,' he continued, warming to the theme. 'He was Doe's Minister of National Security. There came a point when Doe could not watch a football match without Peter being present. Wherever Peter was, Doe's jet would come to fetch him.'

'What about you?' I asked Bowier. 'Did you have to show Doe that you were serious about sport?'

'It was very difficult,' he replied, 'because I really didn't care for it at all. Once, I arrived at my office to find an instruction from Doe that I must go that very day to a sports shop on Carey Street and buy a Mighty Barolle uniform. The instruction said I must put on that uniform, and report for football practice that very evening.'

'What happened?' I asked.

'I was a clown on the football field! I was useless! I was sent home after ten minutes.'

Improbably, Rufus is reluctant to admit any connection between his dream on Twelfth Street and Doe's Liberia. When I asked him what the end of Americo-Liberian rule meant to him, he replied blandly that he had no truck with politics.

‘Many of the boys on Twelfth Street attended Tubman High and they were very into politics,’ he told me. ‘They were *consumed* by politics. But me? Truth of the matter? Coups, political instability: it didn’t affect me, as long as it didn’t interfere with soccer. I sewed and I played soccer. That is all.’

‘But there is surely more to say than that,’ I pressed on. ‘This was the most significant thing to happen in Liberia in more than a century. What did it mean to you that indigenous Liberians were in power?’

He paused for a long time, reluctant to answer. ‘What did it mean to me?’ he finally replied. ‘Having an indigenous person in the leadership? It gave me hope that I would have a better future in Liberia. Before Doe, I couldn’t imagine my generation ever reaching leadership at its highest level. Now, we all felt we had an opportunity. Government was no longer remote. The officials, some came from my neighbourhood. Young guys, almost all of them very interested in soccer. You could call any of them, invite them to come and see your programme. You felt at ease. I thought to myself, “You know what? I can be this, I can be that.”’

For a man who likes to paint his world in flamboyant colours, he has presented a strangely muted picture. In truth, Doe’s ascent to power appeared to have blasted a corridor between Twelfth Street and national fame. When I finally visited Monrovia with Rufus, and he walked down the famed street of his youth for the first time in a long, long while, he could no longer curb his inhibitions and his memories of the early Doe years spilled out of him.

‘This is where Moses Bapi lived,’ he said excitedly as we walked away from Twelfth Street one evening. ‘He was in charge of Doe’s security. The last secret meeting they had before they carried out the coup, it was held *here*. Twelfth Street was a big street, a big political street, Doe himself came here. It was about one in the morning, the dead of night. He drove in here in a white Honda. He was driving himself. He was here to pick up Bapi.’

One day unacknowledged and invisible, the next day Twelfth Street was touched by power; some of the most elevated men in Liberia were pedestrians on its streets. And this magical rise from nothing was inseparable from soccer. To play on a Sinkor field in 1979 was to be going nowhere. The walls surrounding your world were close and high, your vantage point utterly vistaless. By 1982, that wall appeared to have vanished, and you could imagine that you could see forever. The soccer in your neighbourhood was now organised and serious. Important people took Saturday afternoons off to come to watch you play. If you were talented, if you shone, there were scouts watching closely, scouts employed by the famous teams from the national league. In a year, in two years, you could become a household name.

This is what happened to some of the boys who played in the leagues Rufus had helped to found. They became wealthy. They became famous. People saw it happen to boys they had known all their lives. And Roza was one of the best teams in Sinkor. To wear one of the jerseys Rufus had sewn was to imagine being steps from glory.

Once a year, all the teams in Sinkor competed against one another in a two-day tournament dubbed the Olympics. For the duration of the tournament, teams could field guest players from other parts of Monrovia. In 1982, a Sinkor club called the Green Eagles fielded a 16-year-old guest player from Claretown, a poor neighbourhood at the other end of Monrovia. The boy was dazzling. When he returned the following year, much of Sinkor turned out to watch him play. His name was George Weah. Before his career was through, there would not be a soccer fan on the planet who had not heard his name.

A decade and a half later, when Weah ran for president, he stood up on platforms and told his young supporters of soccer in Monrovia before the war: ‘I will bring those days back. They will return.’

Across Sinkor, people were dreaming and Rufus's name was part of this new dream life. In the narrow world of Twelfth Street, the name Rufus O Zumo Arkoi became associated with breadth. To spend the afternoons in the front room of his father's house was to learn to sew one's way to riches. To take the field in a jersey he had sewed was to take a step towards greatness.

And yet, if Twelfth Street was widening, by the mid-1980s, Liberia itself was narrowing, the meanness and paranoia of its post-coup politics increasingly evident. I put this to Rufus: 'You are a Loma,' I said. 'By the mid-1980s, Doe was giving positions to Krahn people and no one else. Is that why you left for America?'

'That's not really true,' he replied with a hint of irritation. 'No, that's not true. Yes, Doe was a Krahn man, and Krahn people saw Doe as an opportunity to come into government. And they came. But, Doe...' He was palpably annoyed now. My comment had offended him. 'If I had been in Doe's shoes, I would have done the same. Obviously! Obviously knowing the history of Liberia, I would feel very comfortable surrounding myself with my own. Immediately. That's easy. I wouldn't do different from what Doe did. No, I wouldn't do different. Knowing what I know about Liberians. I wouldn't do different.'

'Knowing what about Liberians?'

'That they are hypocrites. They would deceive you so quickly. They come close to you, but secretly they are bringing in their own, until they have critical mass, until they can move you out of the way. So, if I were Doe, I would bring in my own.'

'There is little trust in Liberia,' I comment uselessly.

'Very little.'

'Why?'

'That's how we are as Liberians. Put it like this. Here, a simple place.' He gestures to the room around him, his centre, Roza's space. 'People will see it, and see me being successful. They start building jealousy. That's all.'

'They want to throw you out?'

'Exactly, exactly. So I need to have friends I trust. When I leave, they will protect these computers for me. Even inside Roza. I come to meetings every day with others, they come out of the meeting and they say many negative things about what we're doing here, and stop others from joining the club. Yet they come back and have more meetings with me.'

'What is it about Liberia that produces the suspicion and the jealousy?'

'I always say it is because of how our families are structured: one man, four wives, four sets of children, four sets of goals, not one set of family goals. Jealousy among the four sets of children. This mother is only looking at the interests of her children and is wishing that those children from the other mothers do badly in life. That's the family structure. That's the society.'

When he told the story of how his club came to bear his name, he had spoken with uncharacteristic bashfulness, as if it had happened in spite of him, as if it were almost an accident. It was in fact the essence of the matter. He branded the club with his name to caution others from stealing it. Whether you run the government of Liberia or a soccer club on a dirt road, you build a shield of clients and kin and acolytes as hastily as you can. And even on them you must not turn your back for long. Whatever is yours is yours to lose.