

## Herbert Jocketty's Final Words

My father's last words, of which you'll recognize, will always live in eternal glory, etched into history, into his tombstone, and into the skin of any god-forsaken patriot:

"We take risks. We all take risks, but much due to the inadequacies of our judgments do our risks fail us. The greatest misfortune of any risk is not taking it at all. One's own failure is not attributed to any intrinsic flaw of a human being, but to pure entropy.

But if it were not for these risks, all the failures and rewards, outcomes that worked in our favor or outcomes that worked against them, and with no reason for complaint, in accordance with divine law, we would not have achieved the extraordinary stature that our race has today."

My father had spoken these words into an Olympus portable voice recorder. He froze to death when I was four years old, off on some exploration of Antarctica, studying birds, the Adélie penguin I believe. Ornithology, they call it, but my mother never described him as a bird lover, but one who is perplexed by nature. Even though he took extensive written notes, my mother tells me, he also incessantly spoke into his Olympus voice recorder. She tells me my father found listening to his voice analogous to a literal inner dialogue; he could often be heard in his study arguing back against a younger Herbert Jocketty.

I sit here fourteen years after the fact, with the same Olympus portable voice recorder in my hand. Once coated in chrome, the paint has been scraped off in various parts, especially the corners, revealing its true matte black skin. The sides are covered in dents, much to the contrary of my prior expectations which my mother told me my father had obsessed over the safety of this small device. The inscriptions on the buttons had faded after years of traveling the world, from Socotra off the coast of Yemen to the Elaphiti Islands to the Autana Tepui in Venezuela to the island of Mauritius. The only reason I can tell that the *fast-forward* button is the *fast-forward* button is because it is adjacent to the *play* button. The *erase* button has completely faded and in duct tape above it reads: *memory deletion*. It has a small screen with a narrow black bar that represents a time line and how much time remains of recording. The little one and half by four inches of a recorder had up to twelve hours of memory space on it, and after every hour of recording, my father would transcribe it, rarely letting the storage space exceed four hours. I have always been rather amazed by such dedication to a field, primarily that of remembering, detailing extensive notes about artifacts and thoughts outside his study.

But in this little voice recorder lives what remains of my father.

As my mother once told me, while she stared into the depths of a glass of wine at dinner one night: "I am never surprised when obstinacy gets you killed".

Even his most trusted colleague, Simon Kingsford, described my father once during his annual ‘check-in on the Jocketty family’ as a man who will trust no one besides himself in order to achieve the best results. Simon was in fact the one who had found my father at the bottom of a crevasse, enveloped in a thin layer of ice, a transparent window to his blue skin. Simon told me, or really as it has said in the reports, Herbert Jocketty died with his eyes wide open. What Simon had actually told me is that he is afraid to look me in the eyes, or at least I overheard him telling my mother that.

I have been told I have the same green eyes as my father.

And I’ve heard Simon tell the story enough times to know he had to drag my father’s body four miles to the camp with his dead bright green eyes glistening against his blue skin and white snow, staring right back at Simon, probably haunting him to this day.

When Simon had returned from Antarctica along with the other crewmates bearing the solemn news of Herbert Jocketty’s death, the papers immortalized my father’s final words as Simon played the last minutes of the recording during every interview. I remember when I interviewed for a post at the Boston Globe and the editor conducting the interview remarked: “Ah, you’re the Jocketty boy. We were all expecting so much more than what he left for us.” Then the man apologized for my loss, even though the only memory I have of him is the time he had planted seashells at the bottom of the local swimming pool and we went ‘diving’ for them; but, really, this is all obscured under a grayish blue haze and we could have went diving for horseshoes or geodes for all I know.

My father had garnered quite a reputation as this explorer not afraid of cutting off loose cartilage and often taking on challenges alone. He published many of his expeditions as travel logs, often interjecting some tension among the crewmembers, but as Simon and my mother often tell me, the stories differ greatly from what actually had happened. Nowhere in the publications (which are conglomerated in a box in our basement) refer to his stories as fiction or non-fiction. Perhaps, readers just assumed them to be non-fiction, but as Simon always described them, they are stories that take you from time<sub>A</sub> to time<sub>B</sub> in this world.

In between trips, or expeditions, or whatever one wants to call them, he was often invited to give speeches at universities and other schools, providing us some extra income, along with the books and sponsorships. Besides his last words, he was most famous for holding up his left hand, revealing a missing index finger and saying: “Whatever you decide to do, you better be willing to deal with the consequences.”

For such an unequivocal experience, I have always been told conflicting stories of how he lost that finger. Simon said he came back from a two-day trip through the Amazonian jungle alone missing that finger. According to Simon, my father told him that the finger was bit off by a black howler. Another crewmate claimed my father had

been bitten by a Putumayo coral snake in which my father had to cut off the finger himself before the venom spread. In this version of the story, my father apparently did not hesitate in chopping off his left index finger.

My mother always muttered that my father cut off his finger just to say he did.

But, beside the point, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Time Magazine, National Geographic, The Boston Globe, and The Atlantic all berated my mother and Simon Kingsford and my father's crew for a year after his death. And, in fact, some even misquoted my father's last words. One local paper quoted: "One's own failure is not due to any intrinsic flaw of being a human being, but to a chaotic phantasm." Another provided an addendum: "This is a last goodbye to my family, Beth, for whom I love with all my heart, and my dear boy, Kent." These misprints surprised us all, skeptical of the journalistic integrity of these reporters. I'm not sure if anyone can give an explanation for such anomalies.

But now, I sit here today in front of my father's beat up old Olympus voice recorder. What I am most surprised about is that my mother refused to even listen to his recording. She said one day that hearing his voice would just do her more harm than good. I had found the recorder in the bottom of a draw in his desk, underneath piles of papers. I rewound the tape a minute and pressed play and for the first time, I heard my father speak those famous final words with such clarity and confidence. I had told my mother I found the recorder and she shuttered.

"Put that back where you found that."

The fact of the matter is that I listened to the recording from the beginning of this particular segment up until his death, despite my mother's orders. I cannot say how I truly feel. But I can say I am not surprised. Many will remember my father to be some hero, saving nothing but discovering something. But I will not remember him beyond the physical confines of his Olympus recorder:

"[*deep breath*] I have fallen into a crevasse. About fifteen feet high on either side. It is a mere two feet wide. I thought I could simply just step over it but turns out my toes have been completely taken by frost bite.

I do not have a lot of room to move. My right leg is broken and I can barely stand. I cannot climb. I am forced to crawling.

[*stop*]

I have spent the last hour screaming for help. There is no shame in asking, screaming albeit, for help. Humility, Simon always says, fucking humility.

[*stop*]

I have about three hours of daylight left. And about half a liter of water left. But the water will do not do anything when the night takes over.

[*stop*]

I have thrown my canteen about twenty feet just so I can limp and crawl toward it. I am still alive, but not for long. The cold is slowly taking over me.

With my knife, I slice tiny incisions into my forearms. I cannot feel them but I can see that I am bleeding.

Is this you? [*yelling*] Is this you, God? Is this you punishing me for whatever you think I've done? You revert me back to an infant, back to a state where I have to beg for my life? I will do no such thing! [*muttering*] I will do no such thing. You see this?! [*only assume he is holding his knife*] I will not end my life. You will take me. You will take me.

[*stop*]

Of all the ways a man can go, I am deeply surprised, cross my heart, that I am to go in this particular fashion. I am going to freeze to death. I will lose consciousness, fall asleep, and never wake up. Beth, you are probably the most surprised by such circumstances. [*laughing*] Who knew? Who knew that Herbert Jocketty would be taken aback by accident?

[*stop*]

This is how I'll go. This is how they'll remember me.

[*stop*]

[*whispering*] An Adélie penguin has heard my screaming. It has popped its head into the opening of the crevasse. Its head blocks the orange glow of the sunset like a solar eclipse, with its black eyes surrounded by a thin white ring. Are these your hollow eyes?

[*stop*]

I thank you, Beth. I thank you with all my heart.

[*stop*]

The crevasse is almost completely black. I move my fingers but I cannot feel them. I cannot feel my lips. I only know that I am talking because I can hear my voice echo throughout the chamber of the crevasse. Or am I just imagining the echoes?

[*stop*]

The cold has numbed my legs.

[*stop*]

To wait idly is the worst of conditions.

[*stop*]

[*sounds of jaws chattering*]

[*stop*]

I have played back my recordings. I can hear my voice. I am not crazy. I am not...

[*stop*]

I guess this is it. I will fade away sometime soon. I will become dust and bones and covered in snow. I will be an enigma like Amelia Earheart. If I were ever to be found, it would be in such excruciating and embarrassing fashion.

[*stop*]

See, we take risks. We all take r-r-risks, but due to the ineptitudes, or errs, of our decisions, do our risks fail us. The greatest misfortune of any risk is not taking it at all. Who said that again? Was it Daniel Boone? Or was it Armstrong? Either way, one's own failure cannot be attributed to an innate flaw of a human being, but to, hmm, chaos, yes, chaos.

But if we d-d-did not take risks, all our failures and rewards, troughs and peaks, outcomes that worked, outcomes that didn't, and we c-c-cannot complain, for God as my witness, the human race w-w-would not be what it is today.

[*stop*]

'Chaos'? I am not entirely sold on the word 'chaos'. What's another word? Another w-w-word...

[*stop*]

Chaos. Anarchy. Disorder. P-p-pandemonium? Hmm, Pandemonium. Entropy. Entropy!

[*stop*]

I am still alive. I have lost mobility and feeling not too long ago. This is what it feels to be paralyzed, inept.

See, still, I am astounded by the fact that I was not killed while diving in the seas of the coast of the Andamans, or trekking through the Sahara for two weeks surviving off scorpions, right, yes scorpions, and water I managed to rations, or even the time a drunk driver t-boned our sedan, leaving us unscathed.

I am astounded by the fact that it is not malaria or rabies taking my life.

I am astounded by the fact that the cold will take my life. The risks we take. The risks we take...

[*stop*]

Ok, one more time.

[*stop*]

We take risks. We all take risks. Every l-l-last one of us. Yet, d-ddue to the ineptitudes of our judgments, yes judgments, our risks fail us. The g-g-greatest misfortune of any risk is not taking it at all. One's own failure cannot be attribute to any innate flaw of a human being, but to entropy.

But if we did not take risks, all our failures and rewards, favorable outcomes and the lack-thereof, and with no reason to complain, according to God's will, we would not be where we were today...

[*stop*]

We would not be where we were today... dead.

[*stop*]

Simon often, or always, warned me about going off alone. I told him, and he'll attest, there is no other way to learn. The g-g-greatest challenge is the one you have to overcome yourself, I tell him. B-but he always shakes his head and'll tell me I have three days time.

Once, I set off on a motorbike in Hampi across the Tungabhadra river, the opposite direction from the primary structures of the Vijayan-n-n... Vijayan-n-na... [*inhales, slowly*] Vijaya-na-ga-ra and didn't return for a week's time. I encountered a temple at the top of a mountain inhabited by priests and monkeys. Quite a spectacular view. Lush green rice fields bordered with tan boulders... [*voice fades*]

[*stop*]

He waited for me then. He'll wait now.

It is pitch black. I can hear the waves crashing along the glaciers. The calls of the Ad-d-d... Adélie echo throughout the crevasse. I will die here in darkness, staring at an empty black sky.

This [*pauses*] this is the death I deserve.

[*stop*]

I am weak. I sound weak. I will not be weak. Herbert Jocketty is not weak. Kent Jocketty will not be weak either... [*pauses*] No, we won't.

[*stop*]

Round the rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran. Round the rugged rocks the rascal ran. Round the rugged rocks the rascal ran. Red leather, yellow leather. Red leather, yellow leather...

[*stops*]

Forgive me father for I have sinned..."

And then he spoke those words we all know him by. He didn't stutter once. The pauses were superb, at all the exact right moments, rather presidential. No wonder why others loved to hear him speak.

I was four years old when Simon came and told my mother the news of my father's death. Simon, seemingly a giant at the time, tensed his lips and looked down as my mother opened the door. I sat there around the kitchen table on my mother's lap as Simon bore the news of Herbert Jocketty's death. I'm not sure if she ever did, but I remember her having never shed a tear.

But yet, I sit here today, sitting behind my father's desk, thinking what he would have responded to his younger self. Perhaps he would nod in approval. Or perhaps he would grimace in disappointment. Yet, all I know is how my mother would react: petulantly.