

Fiyawena Mission Station, Papua New Guinea,
17 November 2017

Last thoughts.

Outside, they're very kindly praying for me.

Normally the ladies at least wait till dawn – each day a little more fervent, and each day a little more high-pitched. The mist ascends, the birds of paradise open their wings in a shower of vanilla and gold, and up go the screeching pleas to heaven.

Last night Jokei lay on guard beside me, curled on his side, bush knife to hand. Now, though, my only companion is the moth that remains silent on the windowsill. Foxy brown and lightly furry, it lives on, like me. The difference is, all but the head, half a thorax and wings have been removed, gutted by the ants.

Time to say goodbye to my sanctuary, then: the dirtied window slats from which I hang my socks to dry, the motifs lovingly painted on the wall – 'Jesus Had Compassion On Them' – and the blue vinyl floor where American missionaries once held hands in prayer but where I sweat out my fevers.

On a separate page I have set out my intended route. I'm writing these last words here in case something else occurs.

Already I've checked the medicines and bandaged up my feet. I have thought through the usual protocols, everything that will help me stay

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alive over the next few days. There's little else to do now than study the map, tick off another checklist and say things to reassure myself. At such a moment it's hard not to think back – to times I might have died but didn't. To the life I've lived – and the life I haven't.

I will take up my rucksack at around 8 a.m.

PART ONE

A DANGEROUS YEARNING



I

I watched the progress of my father's aeroplanes, they say, even from my pram. Back and forth they flew, sleek birds that parted the grey clouds of Cheshire and laid their oily trails across my consciousness. Day after day through my earliest years my dad took the 'V bombers' to the brink – at first only the Valiant and Victor. Then there came into our lives a plane that was quite different.

This new one was far off when I first set eyes on it, aged four or five at most: no more than a black slit over Alderley Edge. Then, as if choosing to reveal itself, the aircraft banked, beginning a low run over Prestbury golf course. It was heading this way.

There was no forgetting the first sight of that silhouette (those gigantic delta wings, here at last the perfect paper dart), nor the commotion in its wake. We were watching from down by the stream, I remember. The cold water was spilling over the top of my gumboots. Stewart, my elder brother, held the half-filled bucket and I held a stick. We'd been collecting sticklebacks.

The sky roared and the garden shook. As we stood transfixed in the stream, the Vulcan bomber made its approach.

'Stew, isn't that plane a bit low?'

'It's low, all right!'

'Shouldn't we duck down?'

Such a screeching and howling – as if from a creature in pain. By way of reassurance, Dad gave us a signal. He dipped the Vulcan's left wing.

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And, of course, looking back, I can't help but wonder if this precise moment – a father's salute from the sky – was the source of my restlessness. As youngsters we all dream of taking off, but now, the triangular shadow thrown fleetingly across my innocent, upturned face, my father seemed to be giving me permission.

In those days (this was the early 1960s) we had a red cotton kite. Here was our very own bird of prey, as it hovered, rattling in the wind. We paid out the line, running and shrieking through the sloping pastures, beyond the oak tree, across the stream. The Vulcan, though, was not like the kite. Blatant, unapologetic, possibly vindictive, the majestic harpy was only ever seen in passing. Each day, over at Woodford Aerodrome, the aircraft lifted heavily from the tarmac, being readied for the time it would be trusted with our nuclear deterrent. Initially in a coat of 'anti-flash white' and in later years painted to mimic the birch forests and rich chernozem soils of somewhere beyond the Iron Curtain, the strategic bomber went about its grim duty.

Through the passage of my early childhood – by the age of six, my red kite snagged in the oak tree; by the age of seven, that tree a decorative feature of the new housing estate – I kept to myself, and sometimes I dreamed of these flights of freedom.

It troubled me not one iota that the Mark II being perfected by Avro over my blond curls was an executioner, that its high-altitude mission might one day be completed with a terrible finality. I looked up at those spread wings, a dark angel forever heading beyond Macclesfield: one day I too would go somewhere over the horizon, to the place where my father was always heading.

I lost myself in stories of others who, through the ages, had ventured to these faraway lands. First, as I understood it as a schoolboy, were the Phoenicians, who circumnavigated Africa, and then the Vikings happened upon America. We didn't know much about who they were, apart from Erik the Red, but we might guess that many met an interesting end.

Then came the Great Navigators, when the likes of the dashing privateer

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Martin Frobisher, not to mention the Portuguese (Ferdinand Magellan, Vasco da Gama and Bartholomew Diaz) turned their thoughts to distant shores. Aboard their galleons and caravels, they traced the outlines of the continents and prayed for fair winds, making observations with their astrolabes and rash promises of landfall to their increasingly mutinous crews – just as they'd already made rash promises to their kings and queens – and many of these adventurers didn't come back either.

There followed the Golden Era of discovery, which saw Victorians penetrate the hinterlands often accompanied by a substantial number of retainers; they pinned specimens in cedarwood boxes, solved topographical riddles such as 'the Question of the Nile' and sought 'to Better the Lives of the Natives'. The most celebrated of all was the Scottish missionary Dr Livingstone, who, after thirty-two years of dedication to Africa, died in a mud hut, kneeling in prayer by his bed, having not quite managed to convert anyone.

Next, the Heroic Age, which appeared to be mostly about getting to one of the Poles before anyone else. At last, on 6 April 1909, Admiral Robert Peary beat his rival Frederick Cook to the North – or said he did, though later it turned out he hadn't quite either. The winner in the South was Roald Amundsen, who made light work of it, using just huskies and skis. Robert Scott, on the other hand, believed in the 'gentlemanly art of man-hauling' and was remembered because his end was so British, tragic and beautiful. As the blizzard swirled and the canvas of their little tent flapped, he extended his arm around his best friend, Edward Wilson, before that too froze solid.

True, the motivation of many was questionable – or so it increasingly seemed to me. Columbus, for one, was highly rewarded with gold (or, anyway, expected to be) and other notables weren't exactly averse to a little fame and glory. Peary, for instance, worked up detailed plans for an elaborate mausoleum in his own honour – as if a payment were now due from the public for his sacrifice.*

Few had time for the native populace (apart from James Cook, who,

* For more a detailed overview of many of the adventurers mentioned in this volume, the reader might wish to refer to *The Faber Book of Exploration*, which I happened to edit.

as the son of a farmhand, seemed to think them in a condition no worse than many of his countrymen, slogging away*). William Dampier, who had anchored off 'New Holland' in 1688, reported that the inhabitants of Australia were 'the miserablest People in the World . . . And setting aside their Humane Shape, they differ but little from Brutes.'

Regrettably, this somewhat set the tone for the next Europeans along, but in private, elsewhere and on better days, Dampier wrote in really quite respectful terms of the 'sagacity of the Indians', I felt. Another I had a particular affection for was Mary Kingsley, the indomitable self-taught lady who, hastening through the West African lowlands, fell into an elephant trap but was saved by her skirt. 'At first you see nothing but confused stupidity and crime,' she wrote of her travels in the 1890s, 'but when you get to see – well! As in the other forest you see things worth seeing.'† More often, explorers had a tendency to boss the locals about or just exterminate them – sometimes not even by accident. 'I am surrounded by savages,' lamented Henry Stanley, while noting in his private diary that he'd attacked and destroyed '28 large towns and three or four score villages', as he traversed the same region as Kingsley – his 'Dark Continent' – only twenty years before. Or else they pretended no one much lived in these lands – which was unfair because, if you thought about it, the forefathers of these 'savages' were also explorers. Besides, they knew in which direction through the thicket lay drinkable water.

The good thing was, none of these energetic people were daunted; they marched on while suffering. 'I believe we so forgot ourselves as to shake hands on it,' the crusty, moustachioed Bill Tilman said of his dignified arrival at the summit of Nanda Devi in the Garhwal Himalayas, and such mountaineers appeared to take with them little but their tweeds

* From Captain Cook's *Journal*: ' . . . they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon the Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans; being wholly [sic] unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them.'

† With wit and irony, Kingsley enjoyed provoking her Victorian audience to rethink their prejudices. 'Human eye-balls, particularly of white men . . . are a great charm,' she informed readers with relish. Local cultures never ceased to engage and amaze – especially compared to the 'thin veneer of rubbishy white culture' that colonial officials and even missionaries were attempting to impose.

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and haversacks. Fridtjof Nansen, the cold-eyed Norseman, wore a wolf hide and drifted sympathetically with the Arctic ice; Freya Stark rode without fear through the valleys of the Assassins; Douglas Mawson kept striding through the Antarctic even after the soles of his feet fell off.

And I became convinced that I too would join them – be one of these characters with their perpetual strivings and unquenchable flames. They seemed to feel it keenly: the sense that something in themselves or the world was missing.

But here's the truth of it. Whatever the ingredients – or lack thereof – that compel a child to head off, nothing might have come of it. Had I the talent, I might equally have been an antiques restorer like Stew or an editor like my sister Katie, but something in me would not listen. For my dad was a pioneer, and in delivering that Vulcan bomber into my life he had told me that it was possible for me to be a pioneer too.

Not a test pilot, though. Because, for all that I was a polite and earnest little boy, the sort who tries his best, there was an appalling streak of obstinacy about me. I didn't like to be told what to do. I didn't even like others being told what to do. To vent my frustration, I had to calm down in the garden with Toffee, our pet corgi. Gradually, I learned to go my own way.

And all the while, a sense of an era drawing to a close. When, in 1969, Wally Herbert completed his traverse of the Arctic via the Pole, a trudge of 3,800 miles over the ice, no one seemed to much notice. For that same year a test pilot who wasn't my father became the first to walk on the moon.

From down here on Planet Earth, how peaceful was the scene: that silvery disc so immaculate, placed unblemished by humanity in the heavens – and now within our reach. On this and succeeding Apollo missions I gazed up like every Cub Scout, hoping to spot the lunar module. Together we humans stood in awe, for somewhere up there the next chapter in the tale of exploration was unfolding.

There was just the one obvious problem.

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‘Mum, why did they plant that flag?’

‘I expect because they’re really proud. You see, the Americans got there before the Russians.’

‘Seems a shame, that’s all,’ I said.

It was explained to me. This wasn’t like the cowboy films on the telly. This wasn’t the Wild West, and these weren’t goldminers staking a claim.

My mum took me on her knee. ‘You see, to hoist your flag is a perfectly natural way of celebrating your country – just a lovely thing to do.’

‘Yes, lovely,’ I said. ‘And, Mummy, will they take it away with them?’

‘Take what away?’

‘That flag. When will they get rid of it?’

‘I expect it’ll stay put.’

Like a goldminer staking a claim, I thought.

What could anyone do with such a child? Throughout my life it would be a tussle: I was neither content to be the unflappable test pilot – obeying instructions, hands forever steady on the joystick – nor someone able to sit back.

I was ten before I told my father. By now he was flying from Heathrow, a captain with Zambia Airways. Already, he had brought back weaver bird nests, a stuffed baby crocodile, a night adder in a bottle of meths. I placed them carefully on my bedroom shelves, alongside my shark’s teeth and ammonites.

‘An explorer?’ Dad said. ‘I think that’s a wonderful thing to want to be!’

I still recall standing by the door of what we called the drawing room – the brass handle like an apple in my hand, the carpet a mustard yellow, the thick linen curtains a burgundy red. And everywhere in that room the silence. At last I’d made my intent known.

‘I expect he’ll grow out of it,’ my grannie said.

But my mum sighed, because she knew. Deep down, I think they all knew.

I went outdoors, pleased to have made my announcement. I strode back and forth along the herbaceous border, for the first time wondering about the practicalities of becoming ‘an explorer’. Beside my mother’s pastel blue delphiniums, I agonised with Toffee.

Slowly, my boyhood went by: Thor Heyerdahl sailed his boats of

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papyrus; Ranulph Fiennes led his 'Transglobe' team onward along the Greenwich meridian; Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler climbed Everest without recourse to bottles of oxygen.

I took to collecting the picture postcards sent by my dad. From Nairobi, Nassau, Bangkok, Greenland, they arrived on the doorstep and I sello-taped them into my scrapbook, each one a depiction of somewhere where I wasn't. I would add images of the Garden of Eden – for that too was a land impossibly far off. I marvelled at the tree and its offer of knowledge, that blameless-looking girl and boy. Eve and Adam had the innocence of children – the wide-eyed innocence of me – and in due course, like me, their desire for that knowledge proved costly. But no matter. I peered at them, pre-temptation, carefree in alcoves and shampoo adverts. Rendered by the Flemish in oils, they wore their fig leaves, their glades populated by friendly lions, unharried peacocks and casually passing dromedaries.

I bided my time. Or, as Mr Laimbeer, my art teacher, put it, I wasted my time. 'Are you a dreamer, Allen?' he said once, viewing my artwork – repetitive scenes of Adam and/or Eve in prelapsarian bliss – with more than a hint of disgust. 'I rather think you are.'

A more impudent fifteen-year-old might have referred Mr Laimbeer to his own modest oeuvre, but I daresay he was right. Specifically, I was dreaming of what might qualify me for my first adventure. Already I'd set my sights on a degree in environmental science (it being obvious even in 1975 that humanity was making a mess of our spinning blue planet), while over in the school biology lab I was rearing exotic plants. Unable yet to go anywhere very far afield, I took solace in these humid mini kingdoms contained within a plastic cultivator box, the breath of sphagnum condensing and then peeling down the transparent sides. They purveyed the mystery of Sir Walter Raleigh's 'discoverie' of an empire in the wooded heartlands of the Orinoco, not to mention the 'Golden Citie of Manoa (which the Spanyards call El Dorado)'.

Each habitat was a land to investigate at my leisure, and in the centre of each I placed an insectivorous plant. A sundew, a butterwort, a Venus flytrap. Maybe even back then I sensed that trouble always awaited in Paradise.

And so onwards, towards the day of my father's retirement and the morning when my mother instead waved a first tearful goodbye to me.