NO.26 LEARN TO TELL A JOKE

It doesn't really matter why. on a van ride to NASA as a White House speechwriter, I thought it made sense to refer to Buzz Aldrin as the "Barbra Streisand of space" while making small talk with Buzz Aldrin. Yes, there was an internal logic to this remark. But if I explained it, I promise that you wouldn't come away blaming the second human being to walk on the moon. My only defense is that my nerves got to me. I was trying to make a joke.

However, this was not clear to the only person to whom it needed to be clear. The van fell silent as I was locked onto the angry, ocean-blue eyes of one of history's great men. "Was that a joke?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Good," he said.

And it was over. Everybody exhaled. The awkwardness slowly dissipated, like a fart.

I should have known better. Part of my job as a presidential speechwriter (along with great writers like Jon Favreau and David Axelrod) was finding that sliver where "presidential" and "actually funny" overlap. When in doubt, mock the powerful, not the powerless. Everybody hates Congress; even Congress hates Congress. And focus on the things that everyone hates or loves.

Humor connects us, especially in politics. It's a way of surprising one another with shared context and experience. It cuts through all the noise and says, "We get each other" in a way a litany of policies never can. And that's why a bad joke hurts. It's an alarm bell that declares, "This jackass is not part of my group."

Though I don't know if Buzz Aldrin would use those words. -JON LOVETT

No. 27 HOLD A NEWBORN'S Hand.

BECAUSE WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE, YOU JUST MIGHT END UP IN THE PLACE WHERE YOU MOST WANT TO BE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO TO THE ATACAMA DESERT IN CHILE, EITHER. BUT IT HELPS. BY JOHN H. RICHARD

28

C =

DAY ONE

I step between the shafts of the cart, slide on the harness, and pull.

The cart doesn't budge.

I lean into the harness straps. Nothing happens. It will not budge. I lean harder, planting

one foot in the gravel. Still nothing.

I fall forward into the harness, throwing my weight toward the earth. The straps cut into my shoulders. This time the cart rolls an inch.

So the damn thing moves. It's physically possible. On flat hard dirt with a sprinkling of gravel, a cart filled with four hundred pounds of water and camping gear will creak forward an inch.

This is the moment of truth. Years of dreaming and planning, wrestling with doubts, thousands of dollars, time stolen from busy schedules, and it all comes down to this remote spot in northern Chile, our launchingpad into the flaming dragon's mouth of the Atacama Desert. No life exists here. No birds in the sky. No lizards. No insects except for the occasional butterfly that appears out of nowhere and disappears. The mountains are jagged and naked, raw bones poking up through the dust. It is the antithesis of man, the void made manifest, a place where time stops.

Judging by the desiccated animals by the side of the road, perfectly preserved by the arid climate, their dried lips exposing skeletal grins, it's also a place where life stops. When NASA wants to simulate the surface of Mars, this is where they come.

Jeff and I have come to shout our human yes into this vast geological no. Water is the problem. Jeff figures it will take twenty days to get across. A walking man drinks six liters a day, a liter weighs 2.2 pounds. The math defeats you. But Jeff came up with this crazy idea of the carts.

Problem is we have no idea if we can actually drag them across

the desert. The surface could be too sandy. Or too rocky. Or, as we will soon discover, littered with unexploded bombs from various wars and bombing tests. We'll also be dragging the carts ten thousand feet uphill.

As it happens, Jeff has bagged all seven highest summits on each continent, searched the jungles of Indonesia for prehistoric little people, explored the Arctic, and lost himself in the mountains of Tibet. When he went up Everest, he bypassed the easier southern route used by Sir Edmund Hillary and most other climbers to go up the North Ridge, where George Mallory disappeared in 1924 it was more difficult, but also more beautiful. He doesn't do anything the easy way. I, on the other hand, am a soft-bellied suburban dad who doesn't even belong to a gym. My head is bald, my arms are flabby, and just last week at my daughter's college graduation, a sentimental occasion that had me in tears, the arthritis in my left hip was stabbing so sharp I couldn't avoid limping.

Two inches, three inches, the cart rolls. You have to pull hard, but here on the hard dirt by the side of the road, the fucking thing rolls.

The night is dark, starless and moonless. When we get onto the pavement, the pulling gets easier. The last cars of civilization slow down to look at the crazy Americans hitched like mules between the shafts of their peculiar carts, off to get lost in the desert. There's a giddy moment of hope. The mountain on the other side of the ocean road is still blissfully theoretical. A cool wind comes off the ocean. Then we hit the slope. *Oh my God*, I think. *I'm dragging a swim*-

The Atacama is the driest, deadest spot on earth and wonderfully remote—so we'd have to carry enough water for 20 days. mingpool filled with cement. This is insane. "If you can move a foot," Jeff says, "you can move two feet."

He wants me to try going ten more minutes. I figure I can do that and then collapse with honor, so I lean into the harness and fall forward to get the cart rolling, then plant my right foot and push with full-body strength. I've already learned that if I lose momentum, the cart reverses and I have to stop and plant the foot and repeat the whole process, so I try to keep a steady pace. Despite the cool wind from the ocean, I break out in a full-body sweat.

Periodically, Jeff pulls up to give me advice. The New Guinea islanders walk a little pigeon-toed, he tells me. A doctor named Ed showed him that back in the eighties, during Jeff's first expedition into the highland rain forests.

I try walking pigeon-toed. The effort distracts me across a few hundred feet. Then Jeff sidles up with another piece of advice:

"It's important not to put any physical or psychological pressure on yourself. Go at the slowest pace that makes you comfortable."

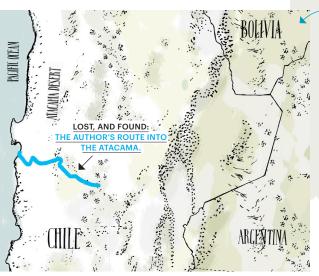
This is why I'm here, to get Jeff's advice. I knew I needed to do something hard, and he was the perfect person to teach me. That's the phrase I used in my mind. *I need to do something hard*.

Now Jeff tells me not to worry. Don't think about the hill, don't think about climbing the hill. "Live in the moment and enjoy the fact that we're doing something really unusual and good for our bodies."

That gets me another five hundred feet.

"We'll put in our best performance if we're free of anxiety," Jeff says.

For another hundred feet, I try to be free of anxiety. Up ahead, Jeff stops and digs through his bags. I put my head down and pull. My new goal is just to reach Jeff's cart



even though I'm already convinced that the whole enterprise is absurd. Realistically, we're going to grind to a halt the minute we get off the pavement. But I know Jeff well enough to figure it's probably best to let him face that reality on his own.

When I finally close the distance, he offers me a fat slice of yellow cheese. Happy sight! We sit on the side of the road eating the cheese and drinking water as the wind dries us off and Jeff tells me about his wife in San Francisco, who is expecting their third child in six weeks. This afternoon on the phone, he says, he started telling her how much he loved her and ended up with tears going down his face. He takes a big gulp of water.

"Now our load is a little lighter," he says.

DAY TWO

The daylight makes everything stark. Suddenly, everything becomes very real. Each degree of incline on the road has weight and mass. The white light glares down with annihilating intensity, the ridges of the hills look like the bones of dead giants laid out in the sun. After a hundred feet, another step seems not only impossible but insane. I shrug out of the harness and fall down on my back.

I lie down on the road. The pavement is so deliciously hot, the wind so pleasingly cool.

No sign of Jeff, thank God. He's giving me space, letting me find my own tempo. But I feel his impatient presence behind me and the voice in my head begins to echo Samuel Beckett: *You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.* And so the nagging emotional ambivalence that underlies my entire life becomes as real and physical as the sun. A life of phone calls and stories, newspapers and magazines, movies and TV and Web sites, the endless sorting of different versions of reality, the endless struggle for the high ground where it might all make sense now shrinks down to something hard and clear. There is no ambiguity in pain. There is only one version of pain. This is crazy. I can't do it.

Jeff pulls up and I wait till he sits down, then lift myself into a conversational posture. "Uh, Jeff… why'd you ask me to come on this trip?"

SOUTH

AMERICA

Dragging 800 pounds of water

across the Atacama

sible, so it's best to

have no idea what

attempting it.

you're doing before

is actually impos-

"'Cause you're fun to talk to."

"But what made you think I could *do* it?"

"You *can* do it," he says. "You've already done it."

I look back down the road. The ocean is still visible, a blue triangle between the mountain's parted thighs. It's farther than I expected but I don't want to admit it.

Jeff smiles. "I hate to be a cliché, but the journey begins with a single step."

I snort. It's "the journey of *a thousand miles* must begin with a single step." *A thousand miles, you fucker.* You're not going to help me by misquoting Lao-tzu. But look at him. How could I expect him to understand? The guy is a beast. And I've seen him in action before. After a

ten-hour hike, he'll put together a day-pack and go out for another four hours, just for fun.

"So nobody else would come with you?" He laughs and says yes, that was it.

DAY FOUR We seem to be approaching the top of the big hill at last, or at least this big hill, and there's an electrical station in the middle of nowhere sending thick wires across the desert. To the mines, no doubt. The energy crackles in the lines as loud as frying eggs. The hills and mountains in the distance are starting to change color, the monotone brown of midday yielding to dark shadows—canyons—that scallop the desert the way a leatherworker's curved chisel cuts designs into a fancy saddle. The yawning emptiness stretches on forever.

I decide to leave Jeff with the carts and walk to the top of the hill to see how the terrain looks. But the top of the hill is actually just a small ridge. The hill goes on. So I go to the next high point and that turns out to be another ridge. And again.

We have to pick a path—up or down? The late-afternoon light throws a wild variety of violet shades on each ridge and hilltop. I look at the endless hill ahead, turn my eyes to the easy downhill track back to the road, listen as Jeff runs down the variables yet again. "The bitumen road gets my vote," I say.



"Let's go," Jeff says.

But we don't. Instead, we dump sixty kilos of water, seven or eight jugs in all, and move on up the hill. When the pain gets too bad, I take a couple of Vicodins and my mind starts to race. I think about Mel Gibson, *Braveheart*, the love of purity, the Nazis, the archetype of the quest, and every journey's "necessary lie"—the concept is from an essay on poetry by Wallace Stevens. I've never actually read it but the phrase has stuck in my mind since college. I think he must have meant something like this absurd journey. In a world with nothing left to explore, where we are reduced to inventing our own justifications, people have a need to pump these merely personal quests back into some grand

theme like "the triumph of the human spirit." But there are no grand themes anymore. Except maybe accepting that there are no grand themes anymore. There's a kind of desperation in that, which leads the purists into their frenzies of purification. To stay sane, we have to accept the lie.

Left right, left right. Scraps of poems keep coming back, the names of people I had long forgotten. I begin to sing.

I see trees of green, red roses too,

I see them bloom, for me and for you.

I've never been able to get these lyrics right, mixing up the clouds of white and skies of blue every time, leaving no rhyme for the dark sacred night. But this time they all fall into place and I send the bridge out to the snow-capped mountains:

I see friends shaking hands, saying how do you do? They're really saying, I love you.

So much music is the rhythm of the march, I realize. Whistle while you work. Melodies rising out of my footsteps. My brain is clearing out, my heart filling up. I feel a joy sweeter than I've felt in years. I start to think about the absurd journey in different terms. Like detectives following clues from disorder back to order,





travelers need a neat little purpose they can come back having accomplished to prove that God's in his heaven and all's right with the The author, and his cart: The head begins to clear, the heart fills up, and, in spite of your exhaustion, a certain feeling of invincibility sets in.

world. Those born traveling may know better, but right now I have to admit there's wisdom in the illusion. If Jeff and I were crossing this desert for Jesus, our suffering would justify itself. Nothing could stop us. But doing it just to get to the other side? That's freakin' hard.

Left right, left right.

Ah, to hell with it. *I hear babies cry, I watch them grow*...Louis Armstrong got slammed for that song. The purists said it wasn't jazz—another reason to hate purists. Let's see if I can sing it through without making a mistake. Jeff's waiting up ahead and I approach him, fling one arm out like Pavarotti and sing the whole song without putting a syllable amiss. I feel silly and happy.

But Jeff is distracted. "I think we took a wrong turn back there." I refuse to let him bring me down, pushing on ahead by myself. We stop at dusk, make coffee and eat cheese and some of Jeff's

spicy tuna. Once we're fueled and rested, Jeff says he wants us to do some night hiking, which is no surprise. I want to tell him I'm afraid of twisting an ankle in the dark, but the expression on his face stops me. He's desperate to make time.

Once we get started, the road seems better. The ruts are shallow, the sand is gone, we're heading down, down, down to what looks like the Salar Mar Muerto—see those ridges, those cracks, those salt deposits? We're on the right route!

The night sky blurs, turns glassy, and suddenly we're walking through a world of fog. Turns out I love night hiking. The wind has stopped, the air is cool, the fog erases [continued on page 132]

29 Change someone else's tire without having to be asked.
30 Offer a stem-winding toast to your father, in the presence of your father.
31 Write a country song.
32 Build an irresponsible fire.
33 Shovel soil onto a casket.
34 Take a month off.
35 Face your own mortality by taking a physical risk.

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Sing for Your Supper

[continued from page 105] and looks at his shoes while we play "Sweet Child o' Mine" and then doesn't give us any money; or else a woman who may euphemistically be called middle-aged and who mouths the words of our cover of the Bee Gees's "To Love Somebody." Oh, these are the women I sang to, the women I connected with, and the women who, in turn, gave us most of our dough.

But they didn't keep us warm. So seeking warmth, only warmth, we moved to Grand Central station, near the crosstown shuttle. On our way, we'd added an accoutrement—a sign on which we'd printed "Get well, Cousin Billy," not to bilk anyone, exactly, but rather to provide our efforts with a sense of mission. Still, streams of people hesitated before its plangent appeal to their heartstrings...before moving on. One good fellow studied the sign so intensely that we thought he was about to pinch our scattered coins and bills, but then he turned to us and said, in a broad North Country accent, "Is this some kind of fundraiser or something?" But no harm done-he didn't give us any money. Nobody did. Grand Central was not one of Billy's high points, financially speaking, and we were left to wonder if it was because our fans felt bamboozled or because the joint was loaded with buskers who attracted large crowds with their amps and freakish talents. A oneman band! A human beat box! A "shredder" who assumed a spread-legged guitar-hero power pose and never let go! Was Cousin Billy too pure for Grand Central... or too corrupt? There was only one way to find out.

We had to go to Brooklyn. We had to go to the bastion of purity-the Lorimer Street station in Williamsburg. We were quiet when we took the train there, for we had heard tales of hipster prodigies who'd gotten their record deals busking at Lorimer Street. This was a place where even the newsstand doesn't sell actual news but rather graphic novels, literary anthologies, and collectible motorcycle mags. And this was the place where Cousin Billy made its stand. We set up near "The Newsstand" and played our set, "Get well" sign and all. For fifteen years, I've been telling people who think I can't sing that they should have seen me last night, when at four in the morning, after singing for eight hours, I managed to lift my voice to the heavens. So stop me if you've heard this...but really, you should have seen us at Lorimer Street. There, a woman stopped while we sang "To Love Somebody" and dropped a twenty in the case-then asked for ten back. There, we found our biggest fan, a guy who happened to look exactly like Zonker from Doonesbury. He stayed for the entire set. He sang along with the chorus of a Cousin Billy original called "Murder Me" and seemed to understand that what sounds like a country novelty song in other precincts was a country *death* song-incorporating an "unreliable narrator"-in Williamsburg:

If you want to set me free Then you've got to murder me

If you want my life to save Then please put me in the grave....

And then he took out a little vaporizing apparatus and blazed.

Cousin Billy!

But that wasn't even the best part. The best part was that we played under a huge I-beam, and for whatever reason it was like playing in a cathedral, albeit one with roaring and clanging subway cars. The sound ... I'd always been shy of my baritone, because I found it flat and inexpressive. Though I had to work hard at my tenor, at least people could hear it. Here, however, I just had to sing, and my voice floated out into the world almost without effort. Did that mean I'd transformed myself into a singer? Or simply that I'd turned myself into myself?

When I first told my dad that I was learning to sing, he answered this way: "I have one question to ask: Do you feel it? Because if you feel it, you can get away with murder out there. If you don't...well, you might as well quit now. Christ, when I used to sing to the troops, the hair stood up on my arms. Do you feel it, son?"

I never did, Dad. I tried and tried-tried to somehow make my voice the outward expression of some inward state, which is what singing is and why there's speculation that humans sang before they could even speak. But I had to try too hard, remember too much, and, well, think-never good for a singer. You think Mick thinks? But at Lorimer Street, my voice issued forth with such ease I couldn't take it back, and yes, at last, when I was singing one of Mick's songs and changing the lyrics of "Back Street Girl" from "Please don't you bother my wife" to the rather more emphatic "Don't you dare call up my wife," well, I didn't have to roll up the sleeves of my turtleneck to know the hair was standing up on my arms.

We went to a bar afterward. We ordered three beers. Charles McNair, Mark Baker, and me: Cousin Billy. The bartender banged the beers on the wood and told us the fare: twenty-one dollars. We checked the kitty. Singing for our supper, we had made \$20.30. It was fantastic, a finish on the order of Stephen Crane's The Open Boat, in which the most hopeful of the men set adrift in the longboat dies within feet of shore. But Crane was writing to address the utter indifference of the universe, and I daresay the universe didn't feel like that after all our singing. Yes, we'd seen indifference on a scale both mass and personal, but even the indifference felt like unaccountable generosity. We'd managed to sing thirty-five songs on the coldest day of the year, and in each one of them we'd announced as loudly as we could: Human fate is not fixed; it's mutable! Human fate is mutable, not fixed! The die is not cast! We had become whatever we had set out to become, and for all the indifference of the universe, it declined to beat the shit out of us-and gratitude hummed deep within each of our breasts, like the tuning fork of a prayer. 12

Get Lost

[continued from page 93] the endless desert and adds an intimate feeling to the night. I feel invincible and alive, my heart shouting out a great I AM. When Jeff pulls up, I can tell he expects me to beg him to stop for the night. "Let's keep going," I say.

DAY FIVE

We're lost. In every direction, all we can see are scattered white salt deposits carved into fantastic shapes, some a foot high, like someone was baking a cake and the stove exploded. You can't roll a cart over these deposits. There are no landmarks, the sun is starting to go down, and now the jeep track we've been following is making a sharp turn back toward the ocean.

We barely get half a kilometer before the track peters out. I stop in frustration. But Jeff keeps going, wrenching his cart over the smaller salt deposits.

"You're going off into nowhere," I shout. He doesn't stop. I decide to try another small path, or maybe it's just a gap between a series of salt deposits. It also has the virtue of going straight toward the tracks. Jeff turns around and follows me. But soon the salt deposits close in, the wheels of our carts catching. Finally, I'm ready to admit defeat. "You're just following me into another form of nowhere."

"But it's your nowhere," he says.

I have to admit, I did like my illusion of a path better just because it was mine. Now I feel responsible for all its defects. Being the leader sucks.

"I don't like my nowhere any better than your nowhere," I say, and we both laugh and the tension eases.

DAY EIGHT

This morning when I woke up, groggy in my sleeping bag, I asked Jeff if it was Tuesday or Wednesday.

"It's Friday," he said.

But I feel good. I'm proud that I cooked the last four meals, I'm finally carrying equal weight, I'm relying on Jeff's encouragement less and less. He takes a reading with his altimeter. We have climbed 945 meters, he says.

Talk about mutability! Talk about the rawness of the road! Maybe this is why Jeff is so sensitive. Maybe this is why he can't stop traveling.

Food now seems overwhelming. Half a cup of ramen is too rich. When Jeff gives me the core of his apple, I eat it right down to the seeds, snuffling at it like an animal.

This is what the desert does to you. The emptiness is so large, the smallest pleasure is an intoxication.

Walking by my side in the moonlight as we muscle our carts through the ruts and dust, Jeff keeps on talking and talking, one tale after another about life and love and grabbing that magic moment when the universe calls.

I remember a time in Berkeley at a famous

Get Lost

restaurant called Chez Panisse, eating at a long wooden table with a bunch of other people, and there was this woman with tangled black hair and the angular face of a bohemian poet and suddenly I was just one big beating heart. Did you ever see Doctor Zhivago? I ask him, when Zhivago and Lara meet for the last time at the abandoned dacha that's frozen in ice? That sense of glory and loss? Exalting and heartbreaking at the same time? I actually did get her number and called her a couple of times. I think she felt it too, but I was married and I just let it slide. But I remember that feeling, like life distilled down to its essence for one shining moment.

Jeff responds eagerly. "Some people would drag it down into the dirt and say, 'This is wrong because you're married, you should respect this or that.' I ignore all of that because to me, that's sacred—it's like God. There's something beautiful there. I think it's appropriate to respond to it."

Yeah, we've been over this. But thinking of it in the context of that woman reminds me of the pain you open yourself to when you choose to respond. No wonder most people retreat behind safe borders. Sometimes God is an angry God.

But that feels lousy too. "Now you've got me thinking about that woman," I grumble. Jeff stops. It's an abandoned boxcar that looks a thousand years old, the wood so weathered it's become part of the desert instead of a man-made thing. We explore the boxcar, feeling blissful. It's such a good feeling to arrive, especially at a place that seems so abandoned and lost to time, like exploring a lost ruin of a forgotten empire.

DAY NINE

Alone again, I walk without thinking, putting one foot in front of the other and listening to the steady thump of my feet. The sun sets and I glimpse the lights of what must be Estación Valencia in the distance, nestled just beneath a dramatic rise of mountains that extend all the way to the white alpine peaks of the Andes.

At that moment I see the moonlight glinting on the railroad tracks and an idea hits me—why not walk on the railroad tracks? The space between the ties is filled with dirt, the surface would be almost level. And the rails look close enough together for my wheels to fit over them.

So I drag my cart up one last berm. And when I get there, it works, my wheels fit over the tracks and roll easily. Giddy with triumph and delight, I start to walk. Up above, I can see the moon rising above the mountains. The moonlight gleams on the rails, turning them into two golden lines that point straight at Valencia Station. The sky is thick with stars that tremble in the cold light. Yes! I charge along, as blissful as I've ever been. Yes! The golden tracks running in such perfect symmetry are my path, my own path at last. Yes! Yes! Yes!

But just as I'm congratulating myself for figuring out the technical problem that Jeff in his magnificent brute will could not figure out, I follow my beautiful golden rails into a narrow canyon and realize that if a train came along, I would get smashed to little pieces along with my cart. There might be enough space and time to throw the cart down the berm and jump after it, but up ahead there's a sharp curve and no guarantee a train won't come suddenly rushing around it. Should I turn back?

No, I decide, I'll stick to what I chose. I hustle along as fast as I can, my heart in my mouth. The canyon goes on longer than I thought and I get winded, but I don't dare slow down. And finally I get around the curve and there's no train and I go a little farther and there, from the top of the rise, I see Estación Valencia. Yes! Yes!

I haven't been fair to Jeff, I realize. When he said nature was his God, the words just didn't register with me because I don't believe in God and have never really felt the mystic wonder of nature before. But I'm feeling it now. It's a taste of something I don't understand, a little frightening for reasons I don't understand, but right now, in this beautiful moment, I feel exalted. Maybe I'll keep going after all.

God, what a perfect moon.

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