As You Do

Richard Hammond

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Extract

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Chapter 1

HOW TO BE AN ARCTIC NINJA

(you'll need a really warm coat)

There are some pretty cool jobs in the world. You can save lives with lasers, run schools for underprivileged children, craft beautiful objects using natural, renewable resources, compose poetry, invent cures for things – these are wonderful, rewarding occupations in the pursuit of which you might choose to dedicate your precious time on this earth. Or you can do a job that will get you a business card stone-cold guaranteed to get you laid. There are many such jobs, probably more than you would think. And they can all be traced back to the same handful of jobs we wanted to do when we were kids. Spaceman, test pilot, matador, lion tamer – any of these will fit the bill. They all hold the same magical appeal they did when we were five. And some people grew up to actually do them for real. I met a test pilot in June while filming on a prototype passenger jet in France. He took me and the film crew for a flight in the multimillion-dollar machine. We sat on the flight deck with him as he confidently flicked switches and spoke smoothly into the

headset to his test-flight engineers about measuring tolerances and checking systems. He told us that, yes, his job was a good one. Bathed in the intimate, warm glow from a thousand illuminated switches and screens in the console around us, he confided in calm, clipped tones that an exciting day was always marked by being given orders to wear a crash survival suit and parachute for a test flight. That was always a good day, one to look forward to. He pulled smoothly on a brace of levers that sent the undercarriage tucking itself away somewhere below us in the belly of this leviathan with distant rumbles and thuds.

'Wow. Cool. Have you got a business card then?' I asked. And he told me that, yes, he had. And looked slightly puzzled.

'Does it say Test Pilot on it?' I needed to know now.

Leaving his left hand resting on the joystick in control of the plane, our pilot leaned forward in his captain's chair and fished a smooth-worn brown leather wallet from his pocket. Placing it in his lap, he drew from it a plain, white business card. And, yes, it simply bore his name, his phone number and the legend 'Chief Test Pilot'.

'Christ on a bike. How do you stop shagging supermodels for long enough to actually test-fly anything then?'

He was a grown man, in his fifties probably, with steely grey hair and a lot of responsibility. Happily married no doubt, settled in a pleasant house somewhere in the south of England I'm sure. But he was also a test pilot and that demands a certain type of chap. So he knew what I was getting at, where I was coming from. He didn't look at me, but he suppressed a smile, lowered his eyebrows and tended to some distant dial in a corner of the console away from

me. The TV crew giggled, because we're not test pilots, and so we can.

I invented a game that day – it's one of my very best. Business card poker works simply but it takes dedication and forethought to be a winner. The culmination of the game is a simple round of poker. I say 'culmination' because it is the months or years spent gathering the business cards you bring to the poker table that will make or break you. And the cards must have been gathered personally, received by hand from the individual named on the card and not picked up from telephone kiosks or sent off for on the internet. When the big day comes, players sit at a table, each holding a clutch of five business cards. There's no messing about drawing further cards to enhance your hand, it's straight to the chase; the lead player – who must be decided beforehand, usually by a game of paper, scissors, stone – announces a first bet. This is a figure that must reflect his confidence in his own hand without scaring off holders of lesser hands who might take their cash with them. To encourage his fellow players, to keep them in the game, he might show them one card from his hand of five. This might be an especially impressive one, against which other players can measure their own and devise a strategy. Equally, the lead player might show a weak card, lulling the others into a false sense of security. It's a moment laden with heavy strategic significance. As bets are placed and the stakes raised to stay in, so the money must be placed on the table, in the pot, because we are all lying, cheating bastards and it will never turn up otherwise. Lose confidence and it's time to drop out, leaving your cash in the pot. Or you could try taking it away with you if

you're bored with having your arms bent just one way.

Ultimately, through a process of drunken boasting, shouting and boredom on the part of those who have dropped out, a moment will come when it's time to find the winner. The remaining players then declare their hands. Each is measured, not just for the impressive nature of the individual business cards but for the artistry of the gathered hand as a unit. So, a test pilot beats a small animals' vet, yes. But not when the vet is accompanied by a senior Member of Parliament, the poet laureate, a foreign aid worker and an assassin for hire. Such a gathering possesses a breadth of intent, integrity, moral variance and rarity that makes it almost unbeatable. Of course, the holder of the test pilot card might then reveal the accompanying cards featuring the president of an obscure African country, a vanished English lord, the inventor of a cure for malaria and a former Nazi war criminal turned warrior monk. And if he did so, he would win. Though not, I suspect, before some pretty rousing protestations concerning the genuine or otherwise nature of the business cards. It's a truly great game. There is always a fight, every single time. I thoroughly recommend it.

For me, though, there is one business card that tops the rest, one crowning glory to be clutched among your dog-eared hopefuls as you reach the climax of a particularly vicious round of betting in business card poker. And it is the card bearing the following: 'Arctic Explorer'.

Nothing else conveys the same romance, toughness and sure-fire shaggability as those two words. Dissecting the phrase in an annoying English lesson-type way only further strengthens its case. Take the two words individually: 'Arctic'

evokes barren wastelands; sounded phonetically it rings out, hard-bitten and clipped. But the brutality of the idea is tempered by the perceived purity of the white, frozen cliffs, the ice fields and the pale, translucent snow that it conjures up. There is an innocence, an unspoiled, virginal simplicity and a loneliness to it that calls to your soul along echoing millennia of icy quiet. 'Explorer' is, in stark and immediate contrast to 'Arctic', a warm, rounded concept. It triggers thoughts of Victorian heroes struggling manfully to open new and wonderful vistas to the waiting eyes of a more innocent world. It speaks of moustaches, hastily painted watercolour renderings of new and marvellous findings, ruined temples in leafy clearings, desperate battles through jungles, heroic deeds and self-sacrifice in the interest of your friends. The wispy hint of a suspicion this brings with it of the subsequent commercial exploitation of the very landscapes and peoples so discovered only lends a top note of raciness and sexy caddishness to an otherwise noble and romantic role. Write them on a business card together, 'Arctic Explorer', and you had better carry a very big stick around with which to beat away the advancing waves of panting supermodels. In my world, anyway. And so when the chance came not only to acquire the card of an Arctic explorer, but be qualified to carry one myself, I bit hard.

Upping the Stakes

We've become quite well known for our big races on *Top Gear*. The first one we ever did featured Jeremy racing to

Casino Square, Monte Carlo, in an Aston DB9 against me and James travelling by the French TGV train that travels at 200 mph. The origin of this race was when we were discussing if one was taking a holiday in the South of France was it quicker to drive or go by train – and so started the concept of our massive races across Europe. The whole race thing sort of caught on and so, naturally, we did it again. And again. And again. And so the races grew in scale and ambition. The previous year, 2006, we had raced to Oslo; James and me via the ferry and speed boat against Jeremy driving a Mercedes SLR, and so we really needed something big for this year, something to top the other races. There was only one answer: the Pole. We had a big meeting – in the pub – and all agreed that, yes, we must dash for the magnetic North Pole. After a bit of research and a lot of deep-rooted and passionate but entirely unfounded conviction from Jeremy, it was reckoned that it might be possible actually to drive there. This had never been done before, people might well be killed trying, but as we are a car show we all agreed that something involving a car would be the best thing to do.

We needed to make this a race and so we needed a mode of transport for the car to challenge in this dash for the magnetic North Pole. Clearly, there are no trains or buses up there, so public transport was out. In fact, there turned out to be only one form of transport normally available in that neck of the woods: the dog sled. Yes, there are purpose-built snow machines that look like jet skis running on caterpillar tracks and go like hell. But where would be the fun, the challenge, the hilarity at someone else's misfortune in

that? No, the dog sled had been in use around the polar regions for millennia and was, it was agreed by all, the perfect benchmark against which to measure the car in this, its biggest ever challenge. Jeremy would drive the truck, obviously. But we quickly encountered a complication beyond that easy first decision. Usually, these races are done with me and James competing against Jeremy. But the dog sled could only carry two people. It needed an experienced handler to drive the dogs, otherwise they wouldn't go anywhere at all. So there would only be room for one other. And another thing was that travelling by dog sled looked, from the internet pictures we found, to be quite energetic. James is a man of many attributes – he is a talented musician, a knowledgeable car expert and has long hair – but physical fitness really is not one of them. He is robust, yes, and quite tough in a gristly, wiry sort of way, but would, we feared, collapse and die from the effort required to climb on to the sledge. And so I drew the short straw, got the shitty end of the stick and the raw end of the deal. I would go on the sledge while James and Jeremy took the car together. Bugger.

Throw a Stick for the Bear

They sent us to Austria to learn how to be polar explorers. We were to spend a week practising our skiing – which they wouldn't need to do in their car; putting up tents – which were different from the ones we would be using on the real trip; learning how to live off the land – you can't: there's nothing to eat except polar bears, and they want to eat *you*;

and generally arsing about in the cold. The arsing about bit, though not a formal element in our carefully constructed training course, would be quite handy. As it turned out.

We were sent to a ski resort and this was my first ever trip to such a place. I grew up in Birmingham and we didn't go skiing. Skiing to us back then was like going on aeroplanes, something only for James Bond. We went camping once a year in the Forest of Dean. And there was no skiing there. As it turns out, skiing trips are pretty bloody annoying anyway. It's mostly about queuing, skiing. You queue to get your breakfast in the stupid wooden hotel, you queue to get on the minibus or find a taxi to take you to the stupid skiing place at the bottom of the stupid hill. You queue to buy a pass, which you lose later in the day and then you get down to the serious queuing, at the point where you get on the lift at the bottom of the mountain to take you to the top. This, technically, isn't queuing, it's something more akin to fighting, so I preferred this bit. You hang around in a big crowd on a sort of train platform. Except there are no tracks, just a big wire overhead. Eventually, the cable car device lumbers into view and disgorges a load of really annoying people with stupid smiles under their stupid hats on to the other side of the platform.

The car never stops; it just swings around the bottom of the platform on a huge, horizontal wheel until it comes up the side on which you and several million Germans are loitering, ready to get on board. Then there is a really massive fight, lots of shouting, some vicious pushing and, the next thing you know, you're on the cable car, face pressed to the frosted glass, staring through it at crying kids back on the

platform, disappointed mothers and bereft lovers waving mournfully as the other half of their life is transported away on the carriage that someone, usually you, prevented them from getting on by elbowing them in the face and jabbing a ski pole into their groin. It's really rather good fun. But only that part is fun; the rest of it is terrible.

We had been allocated three specially trained, ex-special forces experts to turn a ragtag band of TV softies into a hard-bitten, close-knit force of Arctic Ninja. They had a bit of a struggle. The hotel was nice, though, we all agreed on that. The pillows were soft, the water warm and the bar was well stocked, if a bit costly. On the Arctic Ninja front, however, there was still much work to be done.

It was the third day and we were excited. The daily ritual of skiing, lectures on frostbite, lectures on skiing and lectures on skiing with frostbite was about to be broken by the appearance of something different on our agenda: we were going to do polar bear training. Some of us were still having trouble concentrating since we had, in an earlier lecture, been shown a picture of a frostbitten cock. Not a boy chicken which had stayed out of the coop too long, no, but a man's willie, frostbitten. The image, projected on to a wall in front of us so that the grizzled and blackened remains of the poor soul's old fella stood some six feet high across the wall, was disturbing for a great many, complex reasons. Every member of the team had reacted the same way: jaws dropped, eyes bulged then snapped shut, legs were crossed and right hands thrust protectively into their rapidly retreating groins. Our lecturer told us solemnly that doctors had been left with no choice but to trim – note the use of the deliberately neat

and inoffensive word 'trim' to describe an act so brutal it turns your guts to ice – but to trim they said, nonetheless, the first two inches off the man's penis. There was a lengthy silence while we all thought exactly the same thing. So I said it:

'Holy shit, at minus fifty degrees, that first two inches would account for the whole of my knob and the first inch of my pelvis.'

It was not a nice lecture at all and some of us had not slept well the following night, leaving us feeling groggy and scared that day for the first of our lectures on what were to become close, if not especially welcome, friends – polar bears.

This, we had been warned, was essential stuff. The bears, portrayed in cartoons and Glacier Mint adverts as cuddly, amiable critters with big fluffy paws, cute black noses and posh voices are, as it turns out, psychopathic killers which hunt the Arctic wastelands for babies they can murder for fun. They would all want to kill us as soon as we stepped off the plane; some would probably be hiding in the overhead lockers ready to fall out and kill us when we opened them. So it was important that we learned how to tackle a bear, should we meet one. Which we almost certainly would.

We had spent the morning in the lecture theatre where the experts explained earnestly that the bears are not frightened of us because they are the top predators in their world and have never encountered anything to be scared of. They actively hunt humans, sometimes for days, and wait for their opportunity to strike. We would learn more about them in the afternoon but had finished our morning lecture with a quick run-through of the procedure we would go through

if and when we encountered a bear. Our trainer produced a shotgun. It was a Remington semi-automatic, black from stock to muzzle and as sinister looking as an Apache gunship. He showed us the shells he was loading into it. They were shotgun cartridges but, instead of containing dozens of tiny shot, the plastic shroud held a single, massive piece like a plumb bob. It was a 20-bore shotgun and could stop an elephant, never mind a bear. The gun took five cartridges, our trainer explained, and he slammed the pump-loading mechanism back and forth, just like on the films. One of our team giggled at the Rambo moment. Our trainer ignored him and pressed on, explaining that with one 'up the spout', loaded into the breech, there were now four in the magazine ready to go.

Then he grew very solemn indeed. It was very important that we didn't kill a bear; it meant a lot of difficulty for the mission and a lot of very upset locals completing a lot of paperwork under very close and uncomfortable attention from all sorts of organisations.

'So why have we got a shotgun then?' A reasonable enough question from the back of the room.

'We could throw it and give the bear something fun to chase.' A soundman's contribution found favour with junior members of the team. And me.

'They'd like that.'

'Fetch!' a mime was beginning at the back of the room with one bloke throwing a stick and another, as a bear, panting after it.

Our trainer explained that it was there just in case. We would go through this later, he told us, but basically the idea

of the shotgun was to scare the bear off, not to kill it. Before we ever used it, we would try everything in our power to scare it off.

'Oh, right, we try and scare the two-tonne killer bear off without using the gun. How do we do that then, shout boo?'

As it turned out, pretty much, yes. Arctic travellers had found that standing their ground when they came across a bear and directing as much noise at it as possible could have a remarkably potent effect. Clapping, shouting, banging pans together, making noises familiar enough to us but alien and subsequently terrifying to a polar bear had been found to scare them off. Without having to resort to the gun. If all that failed – and there was much speculation among our little group as to the many ways in which it might – then it was time to break out the weaponry.

There was a strict order, predictably, governing the manner of firing the gun. We would fire one warning shot to the left of it, one to the right, one overhead and one into the ice just in front of it to kick up fragments and scare it.

'What, so it's scared of ice? Why? It's a polar bear, it's not like it's never seen ice before.' Again, reasonable stuff from the back of the room. And, again, our trainer stayed calm and patient and explained that the bear would never have heard a gun before or seen ice suddenly dance up in front of it and would be scared.

'Well, it will have seen and heard enough shotguns if it's come across other explorers blazing away like twats trying to make ice dance.'

'Yeah, won't that have taught it not to be afraid of shotguns? They just make a noise.'