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Professor Berry

WRI 200

August 1, 1976: Lost but Won

“Thank you. I called this meeting because as all drivers know the Nurburgring is a race track from the Stone Ages. The most stupid, barbaric, outdated, dangerous, track in the world. You’ve all seen the rain which has been falling this morning. Those of you with experience know the Ring needs perfect conditions to be even remotely acceptable in terms of risk. As you can see today is anything BUT perfect, so I called this meeting to take a vote to cancel the race.”

- *Niki Lauda (Rush 2013.)*

Nürburg, Germany. A beautiful, rainy Sunday in August. The forest and roads were drenched by rain as clouds rolled by. The kerbs, walls, and grassy areas around the Nordschleife were wet, and the track glowed with the film of water above it. In Formula 1, drivers were normally expected to contend with these less than perfect conditions. Niki Lauda, the intelligent defending F1 world champion, had just called a meeting along with the FIA to propose cancelling the race and try moving it to a non-rainy day, one that wasn’t “anything but perfect.” Even as a driver who loves to race, I agreed with Niki. The conditions were quite bad, and I know mi amor would be worried to see me race in them. After drifting off for that second I try to make myself focus on the meeting, and the race ahead, this was already a tough weekend, I had just joined a new team, and this was a tough track to race at. Even though I agreed with Niki deep down, it didn’t mean I would vote to cancel the race. “Ferrari’s dirty tricks, we’ve seen

them before!¹” I groan and shrug at my teammate who does the same. I raced with the Ferrari team before, I knew Ferrari tried to win by any means necessary, and given how Niki was leading the championship, cancelling this race would help him and Ferrari. The FIA official present with our group then had to try to get everyone to calm down again, which is pretty much impossible given how we are men who risk our lives driving in circles. We don’t just “calm down.” However, the room is quickly silenced by Niki responding to another driver’s input that “he was just frightened” in the mixture of complaints.

“Which asshole said this?” Niki’s voice silenced everyone. Even though he was a smaller man than most other drivers, his voice certainly was powerful. “Yes, of course I’m frightened, and so are you.”

The room falls deeper silent, I look around, and I can tell that everyone, maybe with the exception of a certain few, agrees. You don’t think race car drivers get nervous? Of course we do, we just are quite good at hiding it sometimes. Niki continues, “I accept every time I get in my car there is 20% chance that I could die. But not one per cent more. And today, with the rain the risk IS more.” James Hunt, simply retorts by saying that we need to do it for the fans, and I even mention to myself that “we need our race fees...” My teammate simply rolled his eyes and sat back, it seemed everyone else really still thought politics was the primary motivation. I knew that Niki truly was scared, even if I lied in saying it was just politics. Niki was a brutally honest person, who wasn’t shy in telling you if you were making mistakes or doing something wrong.

¹ Portions of this story are from the movie “Rush”, and feature a racer who is no more than a background character in the film. A works cited isn’t normally needed on an assignment like this, but I figured I’d include a source I used for specific lines I borrowed from that source along with the parts I wrote myself: <https://www.scriptslug.com/assets/uploads/scripts/rush-2013.pdf>, *Rush*. Ron Howard. Universal Pictures, 2013. Film.

Clay Reggazoni, another driver and friend of mine, once told me that on a car ride, Niki had spent a chunk of the time just shit-talking him and arguing how he was faster, and better at setting up the car. This was true, but not something you'd say directly to a teammate like that. Niki was good at social cues as an emu was at flying, and he didn't have a whole lot of friends on the grid, so there was little surprise when the vote to race and not to cancel was passed.

With the meeting finished, it was time for final preparations, get my race suit fully on, clean my visor, and get some pre-race kisses from my wife! After she gave me some mild pecks on the cheek, and one longer mutual kiss on the lips, she smiled and waved goodbye and headed over to the team's suite where she'd watch me foolishly risk my life for two odd hours. I turned back and headed over to the team to get the final touches ready for the race. "Hey Art, are you ready, mate?" My team boss says as he calls me over to the car. I nod and over to the car, a Hesketh whose sleek black and gold design shone with a few droplets from the light rain. For something that is "only a little more than a fucking coffin on wheels," as James Hunt once called his car, it really was quite beautiful. I put on my gloves, and grabbed my helmet, and finally sat inside that elegant coffin on wheels. It was a snug and tight fit as I got secured and put my helmet on. "How does the track look?" I asked my main mechanic, who then replied; "It's still quite damp, I'd recommend wet tyres, but I did hear that Jochen Mass is using slicks, want to change?" Changing tyres is always a tough choice, and in unknown conditions like these, guessing wrong can ruin your race. Mass was a good driver, but I trusted other drivers more; "What about Lauda and Hunt?" My mechanic smiled, "They're both on wets. I assume that's your decision then?" I nodded and stretched my neck and arms a little bit as the team made final adjustments on the car. This was to help loosen muscles, and also kill those pre-race jitters to be

focused for the start. Everyone looked around as the lights flashed, which would be the signal to go. My foot rested on the gas pedal, revving the engine as the seconds to the start reached from 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, and finally 0. The start lights went out. It was time to race.

I release the clutch of my Hesketh, and get moving. The track is long, has lots of corners, some slow and tight, and others fast and flowing, and is quite tough to navigate. I started quite far down the field, and was hoping to be able to climb up the field throughout the race. By the end of the long first lap, a lot of drivers were coming in to fit dry tyres, and naturally I followed, the track was dry, and dry tyres were faster than wet ones. My pit crew did well, and I was soon back out on the track. I began to push harder on these newer tyres, and tried to catch a pack of drivers in front of me, but sadly, they disappeared from view, being too fast to catch. As I pressed on, trying to catch back up with those drivers in front, I noticed a red speck in the distance of my mirror, it was another driver, and he was also going faster than me. "Shit..." I thought to myself, I needed to pick up the pace if I didn't want to fall further down the field, but I actually took a sigh of relief when I could tell it was just the bright red Ferrari of Niki Lauda. I could tell that damn shade of red from a mile away, the same red I had raced with and represented years earlier, before Lauda replaced me. Since then, I never got a chance to fight against a car owned by my old team, and now I finally could! Maybe I could show Ferrari what they were missing. As he approached, I prepared to make defensive moves to hold onto my position. "Come on Niki, take your best shot!"

Roughly 20 seconds later, having executed a great fake pass up high, and then making a great move down low, I could only watch with pity and mild disappointment as Niki faded out of my sight, and I was left alone, driving around the circuit once again. "Better luck next time..." I

muttered to myself as I continued. I wonder what Niki would say behind the wheel, probably something along the lines of, “Art, that idiot is nothing more than a human kerb.” It’s a blessing and a curse to be driving alone on a circuit, on one hand, there’s no one to pass or crash into...but also if you make a mistake, you could wind up all alone in a bad wreck, with no one to help you...“AGH!” I tap my helmet to focus on the race. Death was always a risk in races like this, a driver had recently been decapitated during a race weekend, which was a very scary sight to see. Even with those nerves, I always pushed those thoughts in the back of my mind. I know that I can’t get worried behind the wheel, because I know mi amor thinks and has to deal with the same thought. Even with that stress I know she must deal with, she’s never asked me to stop racing, because she knows it’s my passion. Well, it’s actually because she knows I make good money from racing, but I like that other reason better. Still, I need to keep focused. “Keep focused Art, what if some dumbass has just crashed out of this next corner? Eyes on the road!”

As I exit that next corner, I see smoke and a few crashed cars ahead, including one on fire. Would you look at that, some dumbass did in fact crash out of that next corner, and now I needed to avoid crashing into him, and becoming a dumbass myself! I slam on the brakes instinctively, and try to wrestle my wheel over to the grassy area besides the track, to also avoid the trio of beached cars, including the one on fire. Thankfully I do, and I’m able to park on the side. I take a breath and look over at the incident, and see what’s going on. I quickly notice a few things; First, I can tell that the car on fire is...a Ferrari? I then knew the guy that wrecked indeed wasn’t a dumbass, it must have been Niki. I then saw movement from other cars, possibly drivers getting out of their cars, but why were they in such a rush? Then I could tell why. I could see glimpses of Niki’s hair and exposed face through the flames, his helmet was knocked off from

his crash. His head had little to no protection from the 900 degree fireball that now was consuming his vehicle.

I know I have to join them and help, I pull the steering wheel aside, shut down the engine, and then unfasten my seatbelt. “Click, click, up!” I say to myself, and hoist myself out of my car. Once I’m out, I make my way across the track, to try and help the other drivers deal with Niki’s inferno. I notice one of them holding a fire extinguisher, hoping to do something to limit the fire, although it seems to not be working. Another one told me, as he backed away from the fierce flames; “I got one of his straps undone, but the other is stuck, he can’t pull himself out!” He turns to the other guy, who is still trying to sporadically spray onto the flames. I move up close, and then back away as another surge of flames rises up. I can hear the groans from Niki as the fire continues, groans I know would stop if we couldn’t get him out soon, and we certainly didn’t want that to happen. I needed to do something now. I took a deep breath, and prepared myself to do the dumbest, but also bravest thing I’d ever try in my life; going into that 900 degree inferno. It was the only way we could get Niki out. Even if he was too honest for his own good, and even if he replaced me and stole my Ferrari drive, I couldn’t just sit back and watch him die. “Forgive me, mi amor...” I say to myself, as maybe some apology that would magically travel over 14 kilometers to reach my wife, who would certainly not approve of this foolish act. After another driver calmed the flames a little after a spray, I took a deep breath and went into the flames.

The suits we wear that are full of sponsors, and cover almost every square inch of our body actually are meant to help protect us from the fire. But my hands and neck are stinging like crazy as I enter the inferno. For a split second, I can see Niki’s face, it’s far different from his

smirking self when he's won a trophy, or that face when he said we should cancel the race in the meeting. He's in pain, and in anguish, and in that moment I feel terrible for him. I then reach down and try to undo his seat buckle, although the metal is burning hot, even through my glove, but I thankfully can click it open. As another wave of fire washes over me and Niki, I grab him from the seat and begin to pull him away. As the other drivers and trackside workers help get Niki aside, I go and lay on the grass, my neck and hands still hurting, and simply breathe. In, out...inhale...exhale. Inhale, exhale.

Inhale, exhale. My rhythm of breathing is broken up by a bit of a cough as I finish a puff from my cigar. "This is some really good stuff, Will, is this Cuban?" Will is the man who changes my right front tire during pit stops. He gleefully nods as we continue smoking. "How the hell can a shitty mechanic like you afford Cubans?" I tease him, and we share a hearty laugh. It was a month since Niki's crash, and he actually was back this week, ready to race. He survived his wreck, but it didn't mean he was unharmed. His face was badly burnt and he needed a skin graft operation that made him look like a character from a horror movie. It was a surprise to see him then standing at the front of my garage, but he then comes over and we embrace. "Art, I wanted to thank you again for helping me that day." He told me in fluent Italian, "By all accounts, I should've died in that damn wreck." I simply smiled, and tried to not stare too much at his burnt forehead. "Don't worry Niki, I know you'd do the same for me, and so would everyone else." Niki shook his head, "No I wouldn't...I'm too weak to pull any of you guys out of your cars." I chuckled, deep down, Niki actually did have a good sense of humor sometimes. "But, I really want to thank you. You didn't have to foolishly brave that fire to save me, and I wanted to give you something just to show my gratitude, as I really hope there's no wreck you

get in where I'd have to repay the favor." He then hands me a small case, which I open, revealing an elegant gold watch. "Ah, Niki, you didn't need to get me this." "No no, you saved my life, it's the smallest thing I can do. Anyways, I need to get ready for practice, I'll see you around when I lap you, and be sure to stay out of the way!" I roll my eyes and smile as he departs to his garage. I took a look at the new watch and smiled, it clearly was quite expensive. Well, even if the fire took away any shred of attractiveness from Niki's face, it could never burn his brutal honesty.