

GROUND UP

Tom Williams

We find him on the track down from The Gut. It's hot as. His shirt's off, he's drenched in sweat and his mate is propping him up as he hops along on one leg. I smell the sharp stink of him and feel sorry for his mate. God he's filthy.

The good thing is that Maeve now owes me a bottle of Oyster Bay: I don't recognise the patient and obviously she doesn't either, we'd heard from radio control that he's an off-duty paramedic and we've been arguing about whether or not we'll know him. It's not that I actually care, one fat fool snapping his ankle on a tourist track is the same as any other fat fool, paramedic or not. The point of arguing with Maeve is to get her Irish accent going, it's stronger when she's stropky and I love it when her face gets red and, hair falling over one eye, she calls me a "feckin eedjut".

So, she's on the blower checking out how far back the police and the vollos are with the wire stretcher, I'm starting to introduce us, her first, when he interrupts, "You put up Chancer, didn't you?" I'm taken aback and look at him again, noticing that he isn't fat at all and that he's got veins like hose pipes; one of the few things I do get excited about these days. So, I answer him, "No, I'm not that old. But, yes, I did the direct start, Feelin' Lucky Punk". Chancer had become a major test piece courtesy of my direct start. Christ, that was in 1990, when my son Jack was a toddler. Now, I don't know where Jack lives.

No, there are shreds of moss sticking to him like sandflies, bits of fern in his hair and his trousers are saturated and torn. Like hell he's been tramping along a tourist track. I look across at his mate who avoids my gaze, turns to one side and stares out into the trees. Through a gap in the canopy, two hundred metres higher, the big white corner of Chancer glares at us through a humid silence. At this point the cops arrive with the vollos and the stretcher and my patient goes sullen as well as quiet.

The IV access is as good as it looks, I slip in a fat sixteen gauge for practice and he doesn't even blink. Then, waiting for Maeve to stop ferreting through the kit and draw up the morph, I ask him, "So, what actually happened?" He replies "I slipped over on the track, crossing the creek below The Gut". Yeah right I think giving him the first 2.5 of morph that Maeve's finally prepped. We put him in the stretcher and I give him another 2.5 after we've tied him down. Then we pick him up and head off. It's going to take an hour to get down to the road but there's no hurry because his injured foot has a strong pedal pulse. I drop back in the queue till I'm next to his mate and whisper, "What really happened"? His mate says, "He slipped over on the wet rocks at the creek crossing below The Gut", then moves away, up the queue.

Feelin' Lucky Punk had been my high tide mark. For me, it's as good as it ever got. The hardest route in Westland in its day, it's still a climb that you just can't afford to fall off. And I'm proud of that because it's got cred that speaks for itself. We did it on sight and ground up, put the few bolts in off sky hooks. I look at the guy in the stretcher and see him as having been ground up and spat out.

But, he's a tough nut and complains not once. Though he's happy enough to finish off the remaining five of morph and maybe that's what finally gets him talking. Or, whispering; "Feeling Lucky?" he hisses at me when the cops can't hear, "I was backing off from six metres but there was rotten rock and a hold broke. I decked out". Rotten rock? I feel indignant at the suggestion.

The duty crew are waiting for us at the road and we load him into the back of their wagon. Instead of "Thanks" or "See ya" he says "We need to talk" as I shut the door.

That night, the Oyster Bay all gone, I add up all the years I've lived alone. I worry about the anger and shame I still feel about Fiona. I wish I could just let go but it drives me mad, not knowing where she went. And the kids. I still climb a bit, and I've got my work and, with all these years gone by, I've earned a "widely recognised for having kept on turning up" reputation in both fields of endeavour. I think how good it'd be to get out of Greymouth but it's the last place we were all together... What If one of them ever comes back? I shake my head, pace a bit and pour another scotch. There's always the net for distraction: The guy we picked up turns out to be, not only a fellow ambo, but a gun climber too. God, grade 30! I think about how he knew who I was. About his final words, and wonder what he wants to say to me. Christ we were good in those days, Feelin' Lucky. I remember again the crux sequence out onto the arête from the top of the incipient crack, Mark shouting at me to get a bolt in for christ's sake, the way I just pushed on through.

Next thing I'm back at work and there's a private email for me on the staff intranet. It's him. He wants me to ring him on his mobile. I get straight onto it but his attitude's not what I'd hoped, in fact, it's all wrong. He takes the liberty of telling me that he knows he can rely on me to "be a gentleman" and not tell anyone what really happened. Okay, I can accept that keeping yet another "climber rescued" story out of the papers is a good thing. But, if this guy wants my co-operation why isn't he being straight with me. He's acting as if he's not sure about anything anymore. Even the most basic facts have gone missing. Did he fall off the clean, grade 23 arete of Feelin' Lucky, or was he unlucky enough to tumble down through the leatherwood and supplejack on the old, grade 12 start to Chancer? He doesn't seem able to say. That's when his motivations dawn on me. There's no acknowledgement here for me, he just doesn't want news getting out that he fell off my route.

At bedtime, I chase down a couple of valium with the last of the scotch. When I wake I'm on the bathroom floor, my back aches and my neck's gone stiff. I can't remember how I got here but I can remember the dream that woke me: I'd floated away on a tide, the water just took me. But, the further out I got, the gentle splash turned to slap and began to buffet. The water got dirty, all in my mouth, its taste too bitter. Now, I look into the bathroom mirror and see in that face where the salt taste began. It's 3 AM. I'll be gone from this town before the dawn.