



## 1. Unhurried

1993

It is a brilliant blue morning in March, and we achieve our 9am getaway at ten past ten. On our way out of town, my fellow-teacher Turuti pulls up at his mate's place, steps briskly from the mini-bus, and grabs the plastic cover off the car that sits in the driveway. He wraps the bulky sheet into a bundle, throws it into the bus, among the students and backpacks, and reseats himself in the driver's seat.

'What's that for?' I ask, with all the ignorance of a newly arrived

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Englishman.

'Tent.'

Huh. I'm used to the most advanced Wild Country domes: but I remain impassive. This is Northland, New Zealand. Once you get used to the carefree, signal-less driving, nothing else fazes you, even carrying bulky steel gas-bottles and garden spades into the Puketi forest. At least, I think to myself, don't let them see that you're surprised. Play it cool. Yes, this adjusting is difficult after twenty-odd years of working in Britain's subsidised outdoor education, but don't let out that whingeing Pom. Act natural.

Even so, big Bertha looks at me in disgust at my asking such an idiotic question. What's this dickhead doing, coming with us on the sixth-form PE camp? He can't even say my name.

Bertha Rewiri plays second row in the school's women's rugby team; in shoulder-pads she is terrifying. And I am grey-bearded, a little worn, and slightly limp, like yesterday's lettuce. In the classroom, Bertha normally turns her back on me to chair a women's-circle on any subject except mathematics. Hmm ... I'm supposed to lead this bunch for two days, up the Takapau Kauri Track today and down the Waipapa River tomorrow. Who will be leading who?

### *11am*

We park at the track-marker on Puketi Road. Our raggle-taggle ten tumble out of the bus. Stephen Steptoe is wearing thin cotton socks and a disintegrating pair of Warehouse sports shoes. I stare at them silently, suppressing a lifetime's good-practice. He owns no other shoes.

Eruera Lightload quietly shoulders his school haversack; it's tiny, there can't be a sleeping-bag in there.

'Got a sleeping-bag, Eruera?' I ask casually.

'Neh!' It is the distinctly Northland 'no', snorted at me from a half-turn. He doesn't give a shit. There are more important things to talk about.

I mention the sleeping-bag to Turuti.

'Yeah. There's not much money in Eruera's house,' he says, unconcerned. He is busily tying a long-handled saucepan onto the outside of his backpack. Turuti Tikū is a travelled, worldly-wise Kiwi – he fought in Vietnam and taught basketball in Glas-

gow – but he couldn't be accused of being a gear-freak.

A few students are overequipped and overburdened, thanks to the local Air Training Corps. And I spot several pillows, and I screw the lid down tighter on the ingrained good-practice. Yes, the less I know about that NZOIA lot, the better. Ignorance is bliss. Anyway, the New Zealand Outdoor Instructors' Association are bound to be a pakeha bunch ... Maybe there are different ways of doing things, up here. There's that biculturalism, which I get on Radio New Zealand every night at quarter past six ... there is more than one way to walk into a few trees.

Look on the bright side: these pupils, with Turuti's help, have run a disco to fund the trip. They have bought and butchered a sheep. They have all turned up at school that morning, remarkably. Nobody is obviously stoned. Right now, they are bubbly and milling, confidently awaiting battle, their strangely assorted backpacks in place, shopping-bags of excess junk in their hands, holdalls of New World cold chicken in the other hands. One guy, our wannabe gang-leader, carries a ghetto-blaster. I have never seen such a shambles.

Bertha takes the biggest gas-bottle and rises in my estimation. Nobody will pick up the other one, so I find room for it.

'Do we really have to do this, sir?' says Huria, half-seriously. 'Does it count towards us marks?'

*11.30am*

We troop across strip-grazed paddocks for ten minutes, ignore the Department of Conservation (DOC) 'Track Closed' notice, cross the Waihoanga Stream, and step abruptly into twilight. The contrast! – from electric fences to primeval bush. Another world, re-generating vigorously. Refreshingly cool. Easy on the eyes.

The Takapau Track arrows us up a spur, gently at first, then more steeply. The snails and the greyhounds become apparent during the first twenty minutes. I drop a gear, concentrate on rhythm, and latch on to Ghetto-blaster at the front. He is breathing like a Melbourne Cup winner, the veins are bursting from his sizeable neck ... and I'm feeling better than I've felt for months. This is going to be fine, just fine. Another ten minutes, and I'll have lost my grandad status.

And who's this, powering up behind me? – Bertha! – red-faced

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but breathing well, working hard yet in control. Some of these country kids, off the farms, often surprise me.

The three of us open up a soundproof gap. Just when I am getting concerned, Ghetto-blaster flops down for a rest. Ten minutes later our backmarkers, Huria and Turuti, puff to a sweaty halt. They are pushing themselves hard, but Huria is a heavy girl and is lugging a ponderous backpack, and I resign myself to a long day of encouraging her and holding back the front of the pack.

The track deteriorates pleasantly, once past the gravelled nanny section. The underfoot felt of mosses and tiny ferns is kind to my old knees. Trees rot and die, at all angles. All is chaos. Yet life is riotous and rife. Blue toadstools twinkle; berries also, exactly the same deep purplish-blue. There'll be a Darwinian reason for that, I ponder as I plod ... a fungus and a plant, choosing an identical hue, in an otherwise unremitting bombardment of green and brown. Now we are dodging supplejack and peering for orange markers. These friendly clues thread us through clusters of ash-grey young kauris, which surely boast the most nontapering trunks in freedom. Occasionally we pass the massive bole of a full-grown adult, bearing gum-bleeders' scars and shedding large flakes of shiny bluish-green bark.

We pass a huge, aristocratic totara, by far the biggest I've ever seen, and I realise that the totaras which liberally sprinkle Northland's paddocks may not be the genuine, mature articles.

Darting fantails flash and are gone.

### *1.30pm*

To sit relaxing under Te Tangi o Te Tui, the fourth largest kauri in New Zealand, has taken two hours' uphill toil; I have gaped too at Tane Mahuta in the Waipoua Forest, five minutes' walk from my car. The sweaty difference is infinite. This is a private, tourist-free place, and you can feel the seclusion in your legs. Let's hope that they never ease the access to the Takapau kauris.

### *4pm, Camp Creek*

'That was a preemo walk, Pete.'

'Aye, lass. It were reet gradely, weren't it.'

She and Huria fall about laughing.

'Aye, lass. It were reet gradely, weren't it,' parrots Huria, approximately.

'But how did ya know the way?' asks Bertha.

'Oh, you get a feel for these things.' (By tramping the route the day before, a Sunday.)

Turuti and I tie a piece of cord between two nikaus and we throw the car-cover over it.

'A very capacious tent, Turuti.'

'Yes, Pete. Rather luxuriously appointed, don't you think?'

'Room to do your sit-ups in there,' I remind him. Turuti, at fifty-one, is serious about developing rock-hard abs and a trim-tone waist – a leaner, sexier body.

'Trouble is,' he says, 'I like my kai.'

It spills out of his backpack: potatoes, kumaras, cabbage, squash, brown sauce (the Glasgow connection) ... And the steaks! I gave up cuts like that at the time of my first mortgage.

He wanders round and gathers up a handful of firewood, which answers another question that I'd been wondering about.

'The DOC leaflet says "no fires",' I point out, with all the ignorance of a newly arrived Englishman. 'It's definite: "Do not light open fires".'

'No, no. Look at this other leaflet,' says Turuti, with a rare show of bushcraft. Then, reading: "'If you must use a fire, keep it small ...'" Pretty clear, eh?'

'Er, yeah. What's small?'

'Ah. Well. That depends on how big your party is, doesn't it, eh?'

*9am*

It has rained fairly heavily for two hours, but now the sky is clearing slightly and I am anxious to get moving. Nobody else, of course, is in a hurry. This is Northland.

Their litter shouts at me from all around the campfire. I shamle about, occasionally chucking some plastic into the fire. A few tins and some bits of foil glint from where they've been thrown into the busy waves of undergrowth.

'Get this rubbish picked up, fellas. There might be another group

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camping here tonight.'

Cold shoulders. Backs of heads. A digging-in of macho heels. None of it is theirs, the silence says.

'Come on, guys. It's your rubbish,' I insist, now with a feeble edge.

'Oh, go away,' says Bertha, as though I'm trying to help her with her maths.

Undaunted I demonstrate how to reach down and how, by squeezing with the fingers, you can use the hand as a litter-grasper. 'Come on, it doesn't hurt very much.'

'Carry on, sir. Show us again!' says Bertha.

'The place is a tip. All the cans go back with us. Gerr'em picked up!'

'Cool it, man. We ain't gonna pick up no shit,' says Ghetto-blasters.

My patience snaps.

'Jesus! I've just picked up most of your fucking crap!'

Eureka! All of them are laughing. I'm a foot taller. One sentence has saved me a year in the classroom.

'We'd better do it, bros,' says Bertha. 'I think that Mr McDonald feels strongly about this.'

They good-naturedly spit-and-polish the whole area. Except Ghetto-blasters. I am beginning to dislike this bow-legged short-arsed little gum-chewing honky, who is an arrogant bugger and as white as Moby Dick. Tut-tut. Control your racism, Peter.

### *10.30am*

Huria has a mood on, the morning blues. She won't talk to anybody and is moving alarmingly slowly. She doubles a twenty-minute section into forty minutes. Some mental arithmetic stretches our five-hour day into the evening. I gather the group and explain the figures, and I say that somehow we'll have to lighten Huria's load. Eruera Lightload becomes Eruera Heavyload. The whole group has waited for Huria patiently and has listened sensibly, and the vital swap has fallen smoothly into place. I feel good. At home. It's all coming back to me. And, it occurs to me, These people do get on well together, in groups.

We pass a notice warning us against attempting the river-walk in

heavy rain. Everybody ignores it, so I do too. The sky is still two-thirds grey, but has a clearing, cold-front briskness. (I must admit that foreknowledge of this section had forced me to phone for a forecast, the previous morning, despite my recently acquired laidbackness.)

And so we launch ourselves down a snaking corridor of overwhelming greenness: river, shingle crescents, inward-leaning walls of vegetation, a long ribbon of sky. I soon miss a vital detour, and discover a new way to travel in the mountains – packfloating – and I learn that the most powerful of swimming strokes, the front crawl, cannot be used with a pack on your back.

Yet unlike most Northland rivers, the Waipapa here is clear. Its bed is alternately gravelly and stony, never muddy. Inviting.

And now the sun is breaking though. Stuff the dry detours. Hammer on.

One metre above our heads hangs some flood-debris, soberly reminding me of countless caving trips. But, then, at the bottom of Black Shiver there's no escape from a prolonged thunderstorm: no banks to crawl up.

*1pm*

The whole river channels down into a narrow, rocky slot: a brilliant place for a fool around. It's hot. The white spray invites. Within seconds, five or six bodies are sitting in the slot, half-submerged, yelling and laughing, pushing and pummelling. This is a fine place for lunch and for tragedy.

At the bottom the slot levels and deepens. A metre or two along, a tree-trunk is stuck vertically between the rock walls. Unknown to me, Bertha loses a shoe. My alarm bell rings, too late. Oh shit! Now she's gone, totally submerged, looking for it, down at the bottom of the trunk ... Don't get stuck under there, lass. Not for a shoe. A bloody shoe! You big lovable stupid, stupid ...

Her head pops up. And then a hand, holding a shoe.

'Bertha! There's a current down there!' I say, corrugating my brow and catching her eyes with a special gravity that Pythagoras' theorem could never command. 'The same current as took your shoe. Don't go down there again!'

She stares at me blankly. She doesn't understand. But she's not a Senior Instructor (Inland). I am. And she has never heard of

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'reckless disregard'. I have.

And so I sit quietly on the warm rock, and I look in my Manual 27 to see where I lie in 'Profile of a Managed Crisis'. OK, relax: I'm in 'Orderly Return To Normal Stress Levels'. Yet this is new territory; we did not have Manual 27 in the UK. We simply recognised that risks existed, led knowledgeably, stayed vigilant, and shunned complacency; we were highly motivated people, working with our wits about us. Strewth, New Zealand is so far ahead! And, do I want all this again? I ask myself. Do I *want* to get back into outdoor ed? Maybe I could stay with trigonometry and save the hills for myself, rediscover the first, white-hot surge of thirty years ago.

*3pm*

My first-aid certificate is invalid, three years past its renewal date, but I cope. I wrap Stephen's feet in five bucks worth of sticking plaster. (Yeah, I know: it's probably banned now, like everything else; they'll ban first-aid kits next, roll on the day. But I am conveniently out of date, and the white stretchy stuff is shit-hot for disintegrating feet.) Stephen's feet now match his footwear: there's not much left of them. We need to keep him moving for another two hours. Turuti munches a lamb sandwich and soaks up the sun; he doesn't seem to notice the desperate surgery. Actually, he doesn't seem to notice anything. Well, if you were in Vietnam, everything's comparative, I suppose.

But an hour and a half has just vanished, with the long lunch and then with Turuti's wanderlust at the unmarked track-junction. I gather everyone and explain: Stephen cannot cope with a backpack any more. Privately I am worried. The day is coming apart at the seams. Again I glance furtively at the risk-management manual, and I learn that by using the four-windows matrix and by adopting a suitable strategy, I could have got us safely into Box III, the low-frequency, low-severity realm. So far ahead.

Ghetto-blaster grabs Stephen's largish pack and sticks it sideways behind his neck, balancing it on his own backpack.

'OK. Swap it round. Ten minutes each,' I suggest. The river-walking is often slippery and balancy, awkward enough with a pack of your own. I would be struggling to carry two packs myself.



I am glad that we've got a few First XV rugby players, even the Ghetto-blaster creature, who didn't pick up any litter.

And now I am working hard to keep up with him. And I still run fifty kilometres on most weeks. He has two backpacks and I have one, and I am hoping that he doesn't speed up any more, and we have been going nonstop for an hour, and he won't let anyone else carry the second pack ... and now he is well ahead of me, out of sight around a corner. Hell's teeth! What a team! – with a huge range of fitness, but with not a moan all day. Stephen is hanging in there. The day is won.

There's time to reflect. I teach Ghetto-blaster four times a week. Well, I'm meant to. On average he's absent twice, he bunks once, and he turns up once, to bounce around the classroom like a caged wombat. He's not malicious, but unteachable. Rugby is his only form of self-expression. Or has been, until this afternoon. I don't suppose that we'll see him again until we get to Forest Pools. Never mind, 'the true leader is always led'; thank you, Carl Gustav Jung.

Bertha, splashing along beside me, breaks into my thoughts: 'How d'ya keep going, sir? Without a rest?'

'A lot of practice. I used to teach it – climbing and canoeing and things. In the north of England.'

'That's where London is, eh, sir? It's cool there, eh? Bigger'n Auckland, eh? Fuckin' loadsa rad bands doing live shit, they reckon. Man, that'd be cool.'

### *5.30pm, Forest Pools Campsite*

Half the group are vigorously playing cricket. Turuti and I have turned down their offer of a game, as we have a large quantity of tea that needs drinking.

'We won't be able to do this trip next year, Turuti,' I point out. 'The leadership scene is tightening up. It's all being regulated. We'll need proper gear. And I'll need some bushwalking qualification and I don't know anything about bushcraft.'

'That's for rich schools. All that costs money. Forget it. You coming again, next summer, eh?'

'Get a sensible-sized shit-shovel, bro, and I might consider it.'

Bertha waltzes up to us, looking sickeningly fresh. 'Gimme five, sir. Here I come, Coast to Coast! ... Oh, you look shagged, Mr

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McDonald. Oh, you poor thing. Can't hack it, eh?

'If you do the Coast to Coast, Bertha, I will kiss your ... hand.'

My mind turns to weightier matters ... One daren't leave a car unattended at Forest Pools for even one night ... A sad comment on rural New Zealand. They say that it wasn't like this ten years ago. It's strange: a couple of years back, I didn't dare leave mine in Liverpool; but at the end of some remote Scottish valley? – it would still be there a month later, untouched.

'Could you leave a car here, overnight?' I ask Bertha.

'Yeah, bro. Ya could,' says Bertha flatly. Then, glancing at Ghetto-blaster: 'Once.'

A shameless ripple of dispassionate badness runs through the group, half bravado, half truth. I'm out of earshot but I catch the drift.

One's impotence and helplessness lie heavy. No tramping – and no 'creative reviewing', 'processing the experience', or other sociological hocus-pocus – will change this; only a U-turn in right and wrong.

And how wrong can one be! For so long. I had always linked the word 'deprivation' with the term 'inner city'. It has shocked me, this rural version.

Turuti is attacking a lamb sandwich, an item which seems to have taken on the properties of the Five Loaves and Two Fishes.

Bertha left school shortly after this trip. A year later I met her brother Wully, a fourth-former.

'Hi, Wully. What's Bertha doing these days?'

'She's in Auckland getting porked off by all the big-time Bloods.'

I remain impassive. This is Northland. Nothing surprises you, once you get used to the driving.