

Via Ferrata

by Jim Cassidy

I am being eaten alive and I'm dying. I've never really seen the ground from this angle, and I never thought that this would be my final view of it. Jesus! As if I wasn't in enough pain. Face down, my view limited to the heather stalks, dying brown flowers and stunted yellow grass and I am being eaten alive. This is not going to be my last view, I have to turn, get on my back and see the sky. Grey and murky as it no doubt will be. These bloody midges. They'll be the death of me.

I try to push myself up, to be smashed down by a wave of pain. I scream out again and again while trying to turn over onto my back. My shoulder burns with a pain so intense that I feel sick and dizzy as I clumsily manoeuvre around onto my back. Slowly and painfully I try to pull myself up, but my body resists, and I fall back. I try to cradle my useless shoulder, grasping it with my other arm and holding it tight to me, as if that will help. Fat chance. I'm sweating and out of breath, exhausted from simply turning my body over, something that I can usually do effortlessly in my sleep. My head swims and now that I am on my back I can tell something else is wrong. Is this the hangover from hell? I can see two of everything. I haven't felt this bad since an open air music festival years ago. That took a combination of a vast quantity of real ale and burning sunshine to floor me. I can't taste booze in my mouth. Blood, yes. But not booze. I'm pretty sure that I'm not at a music festival, nor am I lying drunk in a field. It's getting dark, but even I, in my pseudo-inebriated state know that. So where the bloody hell am I? I raise my head, squinting like a demented Popeye, trying to reduce the images received by my brain to single figures. I'm greeted by a modern art masterpiece. Unpacked Rucksack by Tracey Emin. A tangle of rope, a scattering of stuffsacks and my stove with accompanying packets and utensils radiate out from what was once a top of the range piece of outdoor equipment, reduced now to a torn mess of webbing and fabric. Strangely, lying here in agony, my body smashed I'm suddenly angry about my battered gear. I liked that rucksack! Hours of swithering over capacity, back system, hydration bladder compatability, price, even the colour. "A great choice, it's a real heavy duty sack that'll last you for years, Sir." A bag for life I was told. It just might be. To see it in such a state just isn't right. It's an old friend. How many miles has it accompanied me on? Now it's beyond repair. Ruined.

Am I?

I drunkenly turn my head, looking in vain to see where I've fallen from. I can't see behind me, but from what I can see I'm lying on a fairly flattish area, in a mix of grasses and heather. To one side the ground rises slightly, but only by a few feet. I can see nothing which would explain the state of my body or my equipment. I try to turn my head further, only to feel a knife sharp stab in my shoulder, my body reminding me that all isn't well and it would rather I didn't wriggle around.

Lie still. Look at the clouds. Relax. Darkness...

My eyes flick open. Still two sets of everything. I'm now starting to hear things, but nothing makes sense. It's all mush, like someone has plugged my ears with marshmallow. "HEY! HELLO! HERE!" is what I think I tried to say. All I hear is a muffled stream of garbage with a backing track of a demented jet engine's high pitched whine.

I suddenly remember flying. Not falling. Not the downward variety, but a slow motion horizontal flightpath, twisting like the worlds slowest bullet. The sky, dark, cloudy and threatening rain, rotating to ground, soft heather and grass. Not so soft on impact. They say it's not how far you fall that gets you, or in my case how far you fly, it's the sudden loss of velocity when you collide with Mother Earth. I can see it coming. I KNOW it's as unstoppable as nightfall and I can do nothing to prevent its arrival. It doesn't stop me trying. I flail hopelessly, as though falling through syrup. I hit the ground, a wave of sickness filling my throat as my head connects, my legs rotating upwards, silhouetted against the clouds, then lowering to finally come to rest as everything goes black.

Noise again. I wake with a start. Clearer now that the ringing has subsided.

Hello! Is there someone there? Hello?

I realise I wasn't alone. Someone was with me... Of course! Bloody hell. John!

"John!"

"John!"

He must have seen me fall. He'll be looking for me. I need to sit up, to stand up so he can see me, so I can see him. He can get help. I slowly begin to shuffle upwards, roaring with pain as I do so.

"Hey! HELP!"

I pause to listen, trying to hear over that bloody whine, the same noise you used to get when you woke up at three in the morning in front of the television. A faint answering cry. John must be nearby!

John! John had the map. I remember that much.

"This way is shorter, it'll cut some distance off. We can get back earlier and grab a beer before heading home" he had said.

"I'm not so sure. It could be dodgy. Shouldn't we go the long way back?"

"Ach, we'll be fine. C'mon..."

From behind me I hear a shout. "Over here, he's over here..." Twisting my neck I see a dark figure dropping down from the rise. "Are you alright?" it says. I nod feebly. I sink back, suddenly relaxed. Safe. It's going to be fine. Then a slow realisation as the figure draws nearer. It isn't John. My head is swimming, and I look again to see a stranger with an orange goretex jacket and a shirt and tie standing over me. Why would someone with a shirt and tie be out here? I know Mountain Rescue are getting more professional but this is taking it a bit too far.

John?

Another figure comes into view, dressed like the first. Only now I notice the orange hi-visibility vest he is wearing and the fog in my head begins to clear as I recognise the familiar logo of lines and arrows.

"Are you hurt? Don't worry, help is on its way. What's your name?"

"Kevin" I mumble.

"Kevin, how badly are you hurt? Can you stand?"

"I don't think so. Have you seen my mate, John? Is he alright?"

He carries on with his line of questioning, deftly avoiding mine.

"Kevin, do you know what happened? Do you know how you got here?"

"I'm not sure. At first I thought I had fallen, but now... I remember John was leading... "

The other man kneels down next to me, clutching a bright green first aid kit.

"Kevin son, I'm Joe. I'm the guard on the train. You were on the line back there". He gestured behind me. Not a rise but a railway embankment. John's bloody short cut.

"John, I don't think this is a good idea. What is a train comes?"

"The last train went past about half an hour ago, remember we saw it as we were coming down? The next one isn't due for another four hours."

"You sure?"

"Trust me. We're in the middle of nowhere. It's hardly Glasgow Central, is it?"

Joe moves away as his phone begins to ring, and he turns away slightly, his voice becoming muffled to me once more. I catch a few words though, enough to paint unwanted images in my head. "Hi Control... require immediate medical assistance...yes, one casualty." I see his head turn slightly towards me, a small, almost guilty movement, but one which silently conveys such a massive hammer blow. I see him tuck his head away but I can just make out his voice: "...and one fatality..."