

Lucky Break

by

Paul Marks

I had a feeling that I knew what the conversation was going to be about, and despite the fact that I had steeled myself to it, I could still feel the lump develop in the back of my throat.

“Take a seat, Paul.” Greg was already lounging in the booth and was indicating the bench on the other side. Susan was standing, her posture displaying her frustration either with me or this conversation. She fidgeted with her arms going from crossed to uncrossed in agitation.

I sat. I was still feeling the after-effects of whatever bug had gotten to me. I felt weak, vulnerable, and I had come to believe that these people ate the weak and vulnerable.

“Paul. When we hired you, we were certain that you were the right sort of person for this experience. You talked about being adventurous, about your hiking and camping experience, about your ability to do well at any task that you set your mind to.” Greg was keeping his voice low and reasonable. I couldn’t help but nod to what he said. Susan’s fidgeting increased, showing that she was holding back from saying something herself.

“Well, I don’t think you’re cut out for this after all. From what Susan’s said, and from what I’ve seen, you just aren’t pulling your weight.”

I shook my head on reflex, causing Susan to jump in. “What? You think you’ve been doing a good job? I can’t trust you to get anything done. You think you’re doing even half the work that anyone else here is doing?”

Greg almost lazily lifted his hand to quiet her and she went back to fuming. He looked at me. “Paul, it’s just not working out. Susan says you weren’t able to get anything done at the gift shop.”

Again, I feebly shook my head; again, Susan jumped in. “You think you got something done? It took you an hour...an hour... to get one... one... rack of t-shirts straightened. I could hardly stand watching you do it, so I sent you to the porch. All you had to do ... ALL you had to do was put the wires on and hang them up. When I check back on you, what did you have done? I gave you enough time to get the entire bunch done, and you were only working on your fourth one... your fourth one! You were sitting on the ground, just taking your sweet time when we have a bus coming in tomorrow.”

She fumed for a bit, but then started in again before Greg could jump in. “I just couldn’t take it anymore, so I sent you to Greg to see if he could get some work out of you.”

Greg shook his head, “And you hardly got anything done for me. The girls were able to move more dirt than you guys were moving. I could see that you were holding Mark back, that you were only taking one shovel for every two of everyone else’s. Meanwhile, you’ve been hardly any help at your barracks. You can’t expect to stay in Susan’s office for the summer. Getting the barracks ready for living was one of your conditions for working here.”

Susan jumped in again. “And I don’t have the time to hold your hand and watch you every second. When Chuck came into the kitchen, he knew right what to do. He started organizing supplies, cleaning the cooking area, and testing the grill. You ... you had to be shown how to properly fold a t-shirt, how to sweep a floor...” she paused as her fury left her speechless. “If Otis hadn’t already left, we would have sent you back with him.”

Greg nodded. “We don’t have any use for people who can’t pull their own weight. I have to fly into Fairbanks in a couple of days to drop off our friend, and I have half the mind to take you with me.”

I had never been browbeaten like this before. The closest had been the way my Grandmother Swanson would complain about how lazy and unhelpful we kids were when my family visited Minnesota. And even then, I had never been threatened like this before. He was going to take me back to Fairbanks? What the hell was I going to do there? I had no place to stay, no job to support me, and no means of getting back to Michigan and my family. Thus far, I had heard nothing of my friends, or from anyone for that matter. What did Greg and Susan think that I was going to do? My plan for the summer was to stay in Chicken from the end of the spring term to the beginning of the fall. I had no back-up.

The pain in my chest and throat was intense. This had nothing to do with the illness that had weakened me; it was all the terror of my situation. Some part of me WAS ready to quit. I hated it there. But mostly, I was filled with shame. I had never failed at an assignment, and I wasn’t a quitter. Somehow I dug deep, and managed to raise my hand to forestall any further abuse.

In my memory and in my mind, I pulled it together. I feel I spoke softly and with conviction. I do not know if that’s the truth. I do not know if my voice caught or broke. I do not know if the sob I was feeling was evident in my voice. I do know that as I spoke, Susan stopped fidgeting and sat next to Greg who seemed to sit up and take me more seriously.

“Can I say something?” Greg stopped Susan from retorting and indicated that I should proceed.

“I believe that you are being unfair to me right now and that you know it.” It was probably the bravest thing I have ever said, at least in my mind. Again, I don’t know if it came out as a whine. “I have been sick, sicker than I’ve felt in a long time if not ever, but I’m getting better. You know how sick I’ve been. You know how little I’ve been eating.

“But more than that, you knew that you would have to spend time training me. Chuck has worked at a grill before. He already knows what to do because he’s worked with a grill before. Kristen knows her job because she’s already worked as a baker.

“I may not be the best worker yet as I’m still learning how to do the job, but I will learn. And I will do much better.”

Greg nodded at this. “We’ll have to see.”

Susan’s irritation was down to a smolder. “We’ll need to see improvement right away, or Greg will take you back to Fairbanks.”

Her attitude suddenly shifted and her face took on a caring look. “We just expected more from you. We know you’ve been sick, but you seem to be using that as an excuse now. We need everyone to chip in if we’re going to be ready for the tour buses, and the first one is tomorrow. As is, until you prove you’re more serious about this, we’re taking you off the main schedule.”

It was clear that I was dismissed. As I stood, Susan stood as well, came over, and hugged me. I didn’t know how to respond, so I shrugged myself away and headed back to my tent. Susan’s friend had taken over the couch in the office, and I was given my own tent to use until the barracks were ready. I knew that sleeping on the ground wasn’t doing me any good, and I resented that I got shifted, especially as I was still recovering.

The illness hit me on the first night of my stay in Chicken. My stomach cramped to the point that I wanted to die. I had a high, but not dangerous, fever, and my entire body ached. I partially wondered if it had to do with the Chinese food that Janelle and I shared the night before I left from Fairbanks. We didn't finish it all, and I ate some the next morning even though we didn't have the means to refrigerate it. Still, whatever this was lasted longer than what any kind of food poisoning should. For days, I ate nothing other than oranges, and was thus often reminded by Sue how difficult it was for oranges to even be there.

My conversation with Greg and Sue took place exactly one week after my arrival, and I had only eaten a real meal and cleaned up the day before. While I was still not completely healthy, I did partially recognize that I wasn't working to my full potential. I was in mourning. I missed my friends, my family, the modern convenience of a flush toilet, but I missed Janelle most of all. Especially while I was ill, I wanted nothing more than just to hold her, to pull comfort from her, and to have someone who cared for me watch over me.

I walked back to my tent almost completely broken, but I made a fateful decision in my mind. I would refuse to allow anything slow me down, illness included. I was going to be the best worker they had ever seen.

For the next two days, I pushed all weakness and all thoughts of giving up away. No matter how badly I felt, I did everything that Sue or Greg asked, I did it immediately, and I did it to the best of my ability. I didn't take a break unless they told me to, and I sought out tasks when none were presented. When I wasn't given a specific task, I would shadow my fellow workers in an effort to get to know them and their jobs. I even stopped writing the letter that I had started to compose for Janelle before my fateful conversation with Greg and Susan.

The day came when we moved into the barracks that we made out of abandoned general store in Old Chicken. Greg was taking Susan's friend back to Fairbanks and our move was supposed to be completed before then. Having taken my things to the barracks, I was taking down my tent when Evelyn, the nanny for Greg and Sue's two children, informed me that they wanted to see me in the café again.

Evelyn let me hop on the quad – a four-wheeled, off-road vehicle – and drove me from the area near Greg and Sue's cabin, down the road that passed their sled dogs and Evelyn's small cabin that also held the boys' play area, around the long curve, down the road in the opposite direction of the airfield, and finally to the main complex of New Chicken. The entire time, I was thinking through the possibilities of what they could want of me. I began to worry that they would browbeat me again. It was a ridiculous feeling considering how much work I had done, but I was so ashamed of the earlier encounter that my fear refused to leave.

They were in nearly the same positions that I had last left them. Susan walked over and gave me a hug before indicating that I should sit.

Greg started, "I wanted to talk to you again before I left. Obviously, I don't plan on taking you with me."

Susan jumped in, "Though there's still room for improvement, you've really turned around. If you keep this up, I think you might just work out."

Her backhanded compliment took me back a bit, but I figured that it was just her way. Greg, meanwhile, didn't seem too pleased. He decided to speak.

“I still have a problem with your work back at Old Chicken. You need to realize that making the barracks is part of the conditions for you to stay here. You aren’t paying any sort of board and we provide your meals; you can’t expect to not do anything in return.”

I cleared my throat of the lump that had developed there again. “I ... I don’t.”

Susan nodded, “We know you’re trying, but I’m still keeping you off the main schedule for a little bit. We’ll see how you do these next couple of weeks. These past few days have only had a few buses. We have a bunch coming in tomorrow and I need to have my best people out there. Hopefully, I’ll be able to trust you with that kind of job soon.”

I swallowed and nodded as my hatred for the two of them grew. Off the main schedule meant that I was only going to get paid for twenty hours of work a week and that I would be putting in even more “volunteer” work at Old Chicken. I felt trapped. I just about, just about, told Greg to take me back to Fairbanks, but I wasn’t willing to let them beat me. That’s how I viewed it: they were trying to break me and I wasn’t going to let them.

My anger at them was such that I almost felt that I somehow caused the events of that night to occur. I occasionally have that not completely rational belief, that my feelings or thoughts alone somehow change the fabric of reality, or that reality bends to produce situations specifically designed for me. If nothing else, it feels like I have a destiny.

In this case, destiny had me sitting in Greg and Susan’s living room, watching *Naked Gun* 2 ½. One of the bright events of each week was our Wednesday movies. While no power lines ran to Chicken, Greg and Sue had three generators that provided electricity to their properties. The cabin, the business, and Old Chicken each had their own source of power. On Wednesdays,

Greg and Sue would invite us to their cabin to watch a VHS tape that they would pick up from Tok on their supply runs.

Greg had left after our morning talk. Flying in his yellow Cessna, Greg was returning Susan's friend to Fairbanks. Soon after we started the movie, a couple of miners who wondered if Sue was willing to sell them alcohol visited the cabin. She seemed uncomfortable with the situation; I had the impression that she would have preferred if Greg was there to deal with it. Uncomfortable or not, she took her quad back to New Chicken to accommodate them.

The other employees, Evelyn, Greg and Sue's two boys – Wolfgang (Wolfie) and Maximilian (Max) – and I had just reached the point in the movie where Leslie Neilson was trying to sneak into the warehouse to save a scientist. The design of the cabin is rather open. Only the bedrooms are closed off from the rest of the building and even their walls didn't reach all the way to the ceiling. From where I was sitting, I could see the TV, the dining area behind it, a window to the outside, and from that all the way down their drive until it curved away to the road to the airport. Thus, I saw Susan as she left with the miners and I saw her returning now alone.

The motion only caught the corner of my eye, but I remember thinking that she was coming in a little fast. I saw them do this before; they would keep their quad at a top speed until the last moment and then brake heavily to stop.

This time she didn't stop.

The entire cabin shook with the impact. Dishes shattered to the floor as cabinets along the wall moved. The walls themselves were slightly knocked off their alignment. A moment of



stunned silence hit the group. I was in shock. I had seen Susan fly over the front of the quad and into the wall.

“Sue just hit the cabin,” I managed to say. A second moment of stunned silence passed, and suddenly all of us were running out of the cabin.

Mark got out first, but I was right behind him. The quad’s accelerator was stuck and the vehicle continued to push against the cabin wall. With horror, I realized that Susan was still trapped between the quad and the building. My first thought was that she was dead, but a moan quickly told me otherwise.

Again, Mark was the first to move. He turned the quad off and pulled it away from Susan. Chuck and I were next to her in a moment, careful not to move her in case she had suffered a serious injury. Evelyn was in a panic, asking questions in her thick French accent. For that matter, everyone was talking. It was a confused jumble of conversations. People were asking what happened, asking if Susan was OK, and asking what we should do.

“Where’s Greg?”

Susan’s question brought all of our attention to her. Chuck was the first to answer.

“He’s in Fairbanks, remember?”

Her eyes seemed out of focus. “What happened?”

As the only person to see the incident, I felt everyone’s attention on me. “You hit the cabin. I think you flew over the handlebars and got trapped between the quad and the wall.”

Susan didn’t seem to understand.

“Where’s Greg?” She asked again. This time Evelyn would answer, but Susan’s voice became more and more insistent. Over and over, she would ask where Greg was and what had happened, but she didn’t seem to hear any of us.

“We need to get help.”

“Our neighbors have a radio phone. We can call for help.” Evelyn seemed to have the clearest head, but she didn’t have a driver’s license.

Chuck volunteered to drive, and the two of them took the old grey pickup. Meanwhile, the rest of us tried to find something to do. Mark spent a while figuring out what happened to the quad, and Kristen went back to the cabin to get some pillows and blankets for Susan as we weren’t sure if we should move her, but we wanted her comfortable. I stayed with Susan until Kristen came back.

“The boys are alone in there,” she mentioned.

“I’ll go watch them,” I informed her.

When I entered, both boys were sitting on the couch watching the movie that had not yet stopped. Max had grabbed the box of chocolate that we were eating earlier. He gave me terribly guilty look. I decided that it was best to keep them occupied so they didn’t unnecessarily get upset.

“That’s OK,” I told Max. “You can have one as long as you share.”

Immediately, the two-year old handed his older brother a chocolate. I took the rest of the box and sat down with them until one of the other workers relieved me.

After a long half an hour, where the three of us rotated who would keep Susan or the boys company, Chuck and Evelyn finally returned. The people with the radio phone brought their

own truck, and they tried talking with Susan. She was becoming a little more coherent, but kept lapsing into her two main questions.

As we waited for the med-evac plane, Evelyn would put the boys to bed, Chuck and Kris would work on what we were going to do the following day, and Mark and I would clean glass out of the truck. In their haste to get to a phone, Chuck and Evelyn forgot to take the plane's fuel drum out of the bed of the truck. When they came to a sudden stop, the fuel pump that was attached to the top of the drum crashed through the back window, covering them and most of the truck in glass.

When the med-evac plane finally arrived, Mark and I drove to the airfield to pick them up. The paramedics were careful when they moved Susan to the truck and then to the plane. We watched the plane take off and then the neighbors leave. Greg was supposed to be back the next morning, but we needed a plan for what to do until then and a plan for if he didn't come back. I don't think any of us got that much sleep that night.

It turned out that the time we spent up planning was time well spent. Greg wouldn't show up at all that day. Susan would get in contact with him and he stayed with her in the hospital. Kristen was particularly proud of the way we handled the tour buses the following two days, but Susan would crush that pride on her return. Perhaps it was the medical bill for the plane trip, hospital stay, and treatment of her broken leg, but Susan was very upset that we didn't make the money she felt we should during her absence.

While she was held for two nights for observation, Susan's main injury was a broken leg. She would remain in a cast for the majority of the summer, and her first day back demonstrated that she would need all the help that she could get. All talk of letting me go or of keeping me off

the main schedule came to an abrupt end. Susan's broken leg would keep me employed until I was finally able to prove myself. It also brought a sympathy for Susan that I otherwise would have lacked. No matter how mad I might get at her over that summer, I would keep thinking back to that moment when I saw her absolutely defenseless and calling for her husband. That scene would create a sense of protectiveness for her that would have a hold on me for the duration of her injury.

I have thought back on this incident many times in my life. There are some few turning points in my life that I can point to and say that they had significantly affected my destiny. Otis may have brought me to Chicken, but Susan's broken leg would keep me there that summer. Considering all that I learned about myself and my beliefs during that one summer, I have come to consider it a lucky break.