

## Companion Planting

‘Have you seen these Mr Naylor? They’re just new in.’ Frank narrowed his eyes at the young pharmacist and the fresh graze down the side of his face stung like merry mercy. She was pointing to a rotating display like the dippy model who spins the letters around on that idiot game show. Frank suddenly missed old Jack Pearson, his white coat yellowing around the collar. He never wanted to sell you anything or discuss every possible side effect of your medicine. He just handed over the pills and asked after your sheep.

‘These underpants can minimise your fracture risk in a fall.’

‘Sorry love?’

‘They have foam implants, so if you did fall again...’

‘I’m not planning on making a habit of it.’

‘...they would absorb the shock and help cushion the impact.’

Frank nodded wearily, wondering if everyone over fifty looked the same to her, ‘Thanks all the same love, but I need an eighty dollar pair of undies like a hole in the head.’

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The white-hot pain sears down Frank’s side now like a branding iron. What Frank needs now *is* a hole in the head. He sees the milking stool sprawled to one side of him. Fool of a thing. Frank rides an endless wave of bone-cracking pain while the shed spins slowly. He can’t think what day it is but he knows it’s going to be an absolute scorcher. ‘Catastrophic’ is the new word for days that warp in the heat. Anybody with any brains will be home with the cooler on, not popping in by chance on old Frank Naylor. That personal alarm necklace Ben was always talking about doesn’t seem like such a load of nonsense now. *You’re in real strife here Old Boy.*

Banjo’s wet sandpaper nose nudges against his neck, willing him to get up. Frank moves his left arm, the only thing that works, around in an arc until his hand clangs against the side of the milking bucket. It’s on its side too, but Frank inches it towards his head and slurps a mouthful. Liquid gold.

Of course he could have given up the milking. ‘They do sell milk at Coles you know Grandy,’ the littlest one had told him recently, ‘in the fridge section.’ But the warm-straw smell of Nancy in the morning light was just how he started his day. ‘Bet it doesn’t taste nearly as good as this though, sweetheart.’ Frank had said, scooping the chipped enamel cup deep in the bucket and she’d grinned at him, cute as a button, with her milk moustache.

Milk in a carton. Steak in a cling-wrap polystyrene package. An aqua painted retirement village in town with a metre of fake grass out the front. Quoits on Wednesdays and bingo on Fridays. That pretentious circular driveway lined with miserable-looking yellow roses, all identically pruned to within an inch of their life

and half of them with blackspot. It was no secret that the same Anderson bloke who owns Restview also owns the local funeral parlour. First he's got you in the holding pen, then he's got you in the cool room.

As the jagged pain pulses he replays all those conversations; the ones about not getting any younger, about selling up, about padded undies, about putting his name down at Restview. They'd all tried, he thinks; Ben and his wife, his neighbours, even Doc Simpson had waffled on about surrendering the gifts of youth. *Thanks all the same, but I'll leave the farm when you carry me out in a box - preferably with my boots on.* They must have seen this coming like a train.

But how could he leave? He could still feel her here. He still waved to her at the kitchen window. She still reminded him to prune the roses in winter and deadhead them in summer. He still kept them nice for her. He tended to them in the cool of the evening, flicking off any aphids first just like she taught him. Showering a fine mist of droplets on each bud and bloom with her garlic and bi-carb solution. He'd give each stem a good soaking, freshen up the mulch and stand there quietly in the moonlight, his hands deep in his pockets, watching ladybugs negotiate the glistening drops. The real secret was in the companion planting, the healthy clumps of chives and lavender interspersed between the roses. When he lent in, breathing in the subtle mix of colour and fragrance, he sometimes heard her whisper, 'Plants are just like people Frank, they need a good companion to bring out their best qualities.'

It'll be twelve years this September. The mongrel cancer ate her up like one of those African hunting dogs that eat everything, bones and all. Frank stayed with her at the hospice for the last bit. Her rose garden was in full spring bloom so he brought it in for her, foil-wrapped bouquet after bouquet, until the ward ran out of vases. Ben and the neighbours ran the farm. Did everything, absolutely unbelievable they were. Even hooked up the spare chest freezer on the veranda and filled it with single serves of pumpkin soup and beef casserole. The hours at the hospital were a bit like this mess now, long and slow, full of ache and waiting. Knowing something terrible, beyond grief, was coming, but not knowing when or what it could possibly feel like.

Frank would lift her skeletal frame into the wheelchair and push her quietly past the nurses' station and the vending machine and the signs to theatre, to the chapel. It wasn't anything fancy, just a recycled timber altar with a candle and a large leadlight window. It was too late for prayers now, they both knew that, but they sat there together and he twirled her loose gold ring while the light poured through the glass and made coloured shapes on the soft carpet. That second last day as he lifted her back to bed she murmured something. He didn't catch it the first time and then there it was, clear as a bell. 'Dance with me Frank,' she'd said. He'd cradled her cheek to his and held up what was left of her, her bony hand inside his thick farmer one, and waltzed her around that little square room, humming softly. Breathing in the soft scent of roses and wanting that little dance to last another 41 years.

He tucked her in, paper-thin and drifting, the drugs dripping back into her again from a filmy suspended bag. Her floral nightie barely rising with her half-whisper breaths and those angel nurses caring for her with a tenderness Frank would never forget. One even brought him a cup of tea and a Monte-Carlo every night before she knocked off.

The February sun bakes the shed now and the oven-hot air thumps with the amplified drone of cicadas. Frank's mouth is dry as dust. Sweat slides and itches. Banjo sniffs hopefully for a ripple of breeze. Frank licks the last drops of sour milk from the bucket. *Looks like you'll go out with your boots on Old Boy, just like you wanted.* His sweet old Mum's voice now, chiding him gently, 'You should be careful what you wish for Frances, because one day you might just get it.' Where's the dignity in frying alone in a shed, desperate and parched like Burke in the desert? As the pain drills through him Frank pants through prayers from his childhood. Please, he says, not like this.

He dreams of her, that same dream he always has; she's in town wearing her blue sundress with the floral print, some groceries in her basket. He's coming out of the hardware and he sees her across the street and he's waving and shouting to her, his heart bursting. She smiles and waves but there's all this mad traffic and he can't get across to her. Then everybody in the district appears and they all want to tell him something and when he finally crosses she's gone. He runs up and down the street looking for her, his whole body aching with emptiness. But this time it's different. There's no traffic. No distractions. She's waiting for him. He's making his way across the road, slow and steady. He's so close now he can nearly touch her. She's smiling, her hair is thick and shiny again, and she's holding her hands up ready to waltz. 'Dance with me, Frank,' she says.

Frank's swollen tongue won't let the words out. A beam of light. *This is it Old Boy.* It's not the big white tunnel he was expecting, just a pencil thin ray darting about. 'Dance with me, Frank' she says again. But there's another voice now talking over her. Words crashing into each other. Banjo barking. Her face close and clear, then fading.

'Hang in there Dad, while we get some fluids into you.' Ben's voice. Something wet and cool on Frank's face and drops of water on his lips. The thin beam of light in one eye now, then the other. Buckles clipping across him and straps pulled firm. Movement. A siren in the darkness. A new, calm voice, 'This should help with the pain, Frank.'

The late afternoon sun streams in on his crisp sheets, there are flowers in vases and Streeton prints on the wall. The pain is dull and faraway, like thunder rumbling away towards the next valley. There's water everywhere; in a jug by the bed, coming into him via a saline drip, pouring out of the tap while the nurse washes her hands. Even the walls are pastel blue.

'You awake Miracle Man? The papers all want to do a story on you...'

'Is that right?' His words are surprisingly clear. 'Well, you'd better pass me my comb'. Her fingers are cool on the inside of his wrist while she counts his pulse. She takes his temperature and blood pressure then tilts the bed head up, sliding another pillow in behind him. 'I bet you could slaughter a cup of tea?'

'White with two, please love.'

Her thick silver plait disappears out the door and Frank lets his head sink back into the pillows. He closes his eyes and breathes in his deliverance. His second chance.

‘Here you are Frank - on the house.’

‘Scones and all? I wouldn’t be dead for quids.’

She chuckles softly as she tears open the sugar sachets, and stirs them through his tea, the spoon tinkling against the cup.

‘You’re fit as a Mallee bull Frank Naylor and you’ll be out of here in no time. We have to spoil you while we have the chance.’

Frank watches her spreading butter and jam on his scones, her kindness warming him like winter sun.

‘Listen love, can you do me a favour when you get a minute?’

‘Just you name it, Miracle Man.’

‘Give them a call over at Restview and let them know they’re my next stop. And tell my Ben to start packing the ute with chive and lavender cuttings.’