

FRAGMENTS OF A FREE MAN

by

P. WILLY FRANK

Don grunts as I hop into the passenger seat. He's rifling through the paper scraps that are his mind made material, and hard evidence of a recent past. There looks to be no system to this roving archive, which has grown helter-skelter over the last few years, spilling out of plastic bags and onto the floor of the car are pages torn from *The Herald*, newsletters from his church and the ski club he regularly asks if I want to join, and post-it notes in ALL CAPS.

I've never seen a single lower-case letter in his hand. Even his writing yells off the page at you, in scrawl that looks like it's been frantically scraped into the floorboards while a wife-killer hacks through the door.

TELL MY FAT

He struggles to free himself from his papers the whole drive from Redfern to Roselands, his habitat for the last twenty-six years. The road gets the same amount of attention as his documents and me.

Don was the rabid instructor who set in motion my brief attempt at driving. One of the many lessons he drilled into me was you can't ever take your eyes from the road. Now I look ahead for us both... for me.

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Don chose The Annals for lunch. Though chose isn't really the right word, it implies options, when for him it's the only place to get a feed that fits his routine. It's a wanky name for what reminds me of a high school cafeteria, and while the lunch hour is sterile like the teen dramas I've seen on TV, it's furnished with old people and the remains of their time. The owners' contact with youth is limited to chasing bored kids away from their street signage, and reinserting the all-important second n.

The bistro is claustrophobic with habit. Hearing aids are adjusted, questions repeated, but no one turns down the TV replaying footy highlights. Gestures recur, built into something familiar, a life. And yet the bistro isn't as shit as all that, it's not Don's house. The RSL's recent renovations pose no threat to Rooty Hill. The essential character is still here, simplicity.

The pensioners are left out of my memories set in this place, though it's hard to believe they weren't murmuring bingo when their numbers were up way back when.

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Cricket and footy awards nights take place in Memorial Hall.

After I fail to win again, in the bistro, I have difficulty looking past the wheel-sized plates of surf 'n' turf, t-bone steak, bangers 'n' mash and chicken parm that my family share with the footy club executive, of which Don's treasurer. Of course, no one actually splits a meal. You'd be a real tight-arse to share at these rock-bottom prices.

I'm made to understand that members get twenty percent off Monday through Thursday.

Mum and I go gratefully home in the station wagon, leaving the Land Cruiser to Don. He hangs around to analyse the pros and cons of a recruitment campaign targeted at Islanders, over another schooner or two.

He always comes home early enough to avoid suspicion. He's no punter and he never has a proper booze. I've a sneaking feeling that these are insurmountable obstacles to his presidential ambitions, in the reckoning of the other club*men* at least.

I don't know that sponsorship means the RSL moves funds around to allow the club a skerrick of pokies-money in return for marketing to players and a minimum of functions held in the RSL's ample facilities. The club goes on paying for equipment, sausages and referees. Referees like Don, who never refs one of my games cause of abstract ideas about bias.

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The classic pub food is still here, but now the bistro is Chinese and I don't eat meat. Don gives his habitual rundown of the menu.

'They put the cost up, ah, two weeks-, this year. It was six bucks for the first item *and* the second item. They only put the cost up a buck, to seven, so you can't really complain!'

I venture off-menu for veggie spring rolls and a stir-fry. Don orders the usual.

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I'm twelve when I win my first trophy: Most Improved. I reckon they give me the statuette, moulded from fool's gold, in recognition of the whopping great black eye I copped in the second round. I played every match after that, despite my pleading. The improvement might've been that I stopped whinging.

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During the mad rush to pack and leave, my mum tells me that it isn't fool's gold, just solid plastic.

'Chuck it in the damn box.'

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I consider asking Don to explain the decision-making process for the awards that year, the last he coached. But it's hard to imagine his answer, if he can give one, would be interesting like mine.

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When mum works the night shift, only the dependable theme of *The 7:30 Report* comes down the hall. Don watches in the TV room. I'm lulled asleep by the familiar voice of Kerry O'Brien. The words are indistinct, but I trust that Don computes, stretched out on the recliner with the footrest up, as supine as me. Even though mum hasn't tucked me in, I'm not wholly abandoned to the darkness.

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Again and again I find myself in the house. The world outside the window blurs by and the white lineage of a highway disappears below us. Mum explains that we're on the back of a semi-trailer being towed up the road. The house leaves the earth. We lose sight of the ground and in all directions is the sky and its never-ending blues. Don leans out the cab up front and grins at me. He's driving. I know with unconscious certainty he'll crash spectacularly with us inside.

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The massive car park grips the vehicles between evenly spaced white lines, forming a neat grid, an offering to the sun, which burns into the black holes of each and every tinted windscreen. Don points to the Land Cruiser's new number plate, which shows his undying love of the Bulldogs for only \$250 and applicable annual fees. He squints at it happily.

If a journo had stopped Don on the street a few years ago and asked 'what does freedom mean to you?' for, let's assume, some story on the Australian national character, she would've heard something like this:

Freedom is my car and my motorbikes. It's my encyclopaedic knowledge of the road rules, and my disregard for the ones that are wrong. It's driving the Bathurst 1000 and riding like Mick Doohan. It's absolute faith in my abilities.

Of course, he wouldn't have said that unless struck by a moment of introspection such as I've never witnessed in the man.

Now every arrival is worth drinking to.

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One prank he likes to play on long trips, when the chump in the front passenger seat nods off, is to quickly swerve left then right so that mum's unsupported head hits the side window. Thwack.

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While we wait on our steaks I'm offered the nuts which have accompanied him ever since we left. They're different nuts today, but I can't vouch for the scrunched up plastic bag he keeps them in. I tell him again, you can't bring your own food into restaurants. He smiles cheekily, like a boy letting off the handbrake.

He asks how often I'm working. Twice a week. He remembers one of those days is Saturday, a fact he finds singularly worthy of note. He doesn't ask about uni and I'm reminded that he probably doesn't know what I study, or even what I wanna be when I grow up. Or maybe he's aiming to steer clear of politics.

My aunt would have me raise the subject of his driving again. Make the case firmly and with love: it's better to stop of your own free will than to have your license confiscated, or worse.

I'll tell her I tried. Regardless, I'm spending time with him, which is surely my only responsibility. And all for the measly compensation of a free meal, if he remembers to pay.

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On my 18th birthday, I'm more concerned with minimising family time than sparing mum. I instigate a pub dinner with both sides of my family. (Naturally I don't want my friends to see, we

plan a separate night of intimate regurgitation.) Mum takes the precaution of sitting away from me, and so away from Don. Cousins, aunts and uncles provide a barrier of chat. Still, he shadows us home.

After offering peanuts, he hands over my card. On the cover is a cartoon old man, not unlike Hans Moleman from *The Simpsons*. The text reads: 'Know why old blokes wear their pants so high?' The punchline is inside: 'You will soon. Happy Birthday.'

Don's inscription in trademark capitals announces the car outside, for me. The card does a lap of the table; one side of my family love to share a good giggle. Everyone manages a chuckle. No one mentions the gift. Don smiles and says nothing. So neither do I.

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Was it a gag or an early sign?

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He comes to the point, as he invariably does, when he's downed his first Reschs and summarised his drinking habits. (He doesn't drink alone, by which he means he doesn't drink beer alone, just whiskey and coke. And the ratio is definitely in coke's favour. He assures me like I give a shit.)

'When I'm gone you get the house, in case you wanna get married. And you can get the vehicles from my sister, the bitch, she stole them from me: the new Land Cruiser, that you can use to go on trips with the camping item, that the car pulls, and the motorbikes, cause like I've been pushing, you need to get your motorbike item, license. D'you understand?'

He speaks heatedly, like he needs me to agree.

This routine always feels like an ideal opportunity for a shitfight.

'The car wasn't stolen, and it was for your own sake,' I recite.

Then I point out such evidence as the complete want of cash or other support he's coughed up since we left, and when he changed my high school application preferences without my

knowledge, as irrefutable proof that he is, in fact, a big cunt. But it's only our high school he can latch onto, so he starts talking about the old boys' reunion he attended.

My compulsion to interrupt is weighed down by the debris collecting in the space between my words and his perception, and the home, holidays and sundry consumables I'm unable to forget. The material comfort he provided binds me. Though the money has dried up, he offers to pay more frequently, which is something I'm sure.

I say I'm gonna have another beer and wait for him to shout me. He doesn't. I don't.

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My first memory of him, of anything, is driving through the park across the road from home. Petrol-fuelled young men ripped doughies in that park. They left drunken spirals that never reached the centre. Don wasn't drunk or young.

I ask if he remembers, the futility amuses. He says no like I'm accusing. Could we have shared the dream?

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I ask after the dog, what else can I do? It's one of the things he can still talk about. We'll never again discuss travelling, surfing, snorkelling or other interests he might've had that I didn't care for.

Talking about Nobby lends a twinkle to his eyes that's probably just the TV's reflection. Don's church held a one-off service for pets. I decide he's retreated into delusion, until he fishes out a picture with Nobby in it, as fat as Don. Some pets pissed on the holy floor, but Nobby was well-behaved and didn't get booted out. He didn't even bark like the rest of the dogs, though the sermon was still hard to hear over the howling.

The photos Don shows me are not sufficiently shit quality to hide Nobby's humanity. Though they hide his wheezing and limping. I miss the bugger, but not enough to take him from Don after the vehicles. It'd be rank melodrama, sacrificing one for the other. And I can't risk a visit to Don's demented house, that chronicle of decay. The accumulated grime of the long wifeless

home is barely covered by his documents, which multiply to compensate. I used to drop in and was overwhelmed by the abundance of things, all I could think about was the massive job of sorting through his shit when the house needs to be sold.

An animal is too easily forgotten.

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These lunches stretch out around us in a flat circle, each meal more identical than the previous. Yet I feel like I'm outside the RSL, balancing all this on my palm and looking in through my reflection in the window, able to pick out the buried narrative. In what's called the future, I fear, I'll be lost in the circle and some vaguely familiar face will be at the window, looking in from the other side, convincing himself.

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After pigging out on the spring rolls he dollops the leftover sweet and sour sauce on his beef chow mein. He finishes that and holds up the plate to scrape his knife down it, slopping the sauce into his empty beer glass. Skols it.

As a teenager, Don embarrassed the balls off me. Moving out seemed to solve the problem, or isolate the catalyst.

The other olds probably can't see the food in front of their faces, let alone the gross bloke at the table next to them. Still, I don't snigger like I do when I tell this story later.

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It's my first day learning to drive and Don decides I should hit the highway. There's one lane in each direction and only a few country drivers motoring along. The weather is fine. Perfect conditions.

I beg him to drive. He talks louder, commanding me to merge. The Land Cruiser bawls with over-revving. I'm sluggish into second so he roars at me to change gears cause that's what they're for, are you a moron?!

It's probably a soft couple jabs given his weight (a tanker-sized man who only sinks to animal proportions when we leave). I've been crying bitch-tears since the yelling began, but now I pull over, still an incapable boy who can't drive like every man must.

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Today he's the shell of a man, grounded and withered, a balloon anchored to last month's raffle prizes. His presence no longer prohibits, though his bulk is unchanged.

He's momentarily resigned to the need for glasses while making sense of his post-it outlining the talking points for our meal, and I can almost see the old dogged determination that his will be done. Then he looks up as if he's been caught out, eyeballs warped by flaccid skin, red like he's shed tears, though that's something I've never seen.

He trundles off to the pisser and leaves behind his wallet, which inspires me to swipe his license. He'd have to go into the RTA for a new one, and they'd realise he should be tested, and he'd fail.

But he'd still own the car. And the motorbikes. He's never needed permission to do anything before, and the way he rocks that Hawaiian shirt tucked into mangy trackies, string holding them up, could make me think he's keepin' on.

Or he hasn't bought clothes in yonks, cause it hasn't sprung to mind. A lack of vanity I might admire in others.

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He returns to celebrate a crumpled *Canterbury-Bankstown Express* article: one of my old teammates scored two tries for the Dogs. The name, Soatame Taufu, is highlighted. Don points anyway. He struggles to recount details of the game he must've watched; concentration reveals new creases on his elephantine face. He contents himself with eulogising Soatame, who's making his mark where it counts. He was coached by Don as long as me, from the under 6s to 12s. No doubt Don thinks his guidance a significant influence on Soatame's cracking line break record.

For an amber-instant, I wonder if an article I've written has ever been worthy of his documents. My name glowing in orange highlighter and underlined with his finger.

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The splashback around the crutch of his stubbies settles it. I tell him I'll buzz a cab. Injustice is not yet forgotten: he curses the stranger who supervised the irrational test which took his license. For stealing the vehicles he calls my aunt a back-stabbing rat, abuse he used to reserve for mum.

'They weren't stolen and you got the money from the sale anyway, it was for your sake.'

I say this cause I should, it won't change his mind. He growls on, rotten with impotence, his rage unable to effect the world beyond attracting attention. I figure I'll just pay the fourteen goddamn dollars so we can shove off before he's kicked out. I pull out my wallet and he trails off and waves me away, suddenly jolly and purposeful, leaping at this last act of fatherhood or agency or something.