



Always greener

James Palmer

Rural highways tended to be quiet, especially around this time of afternoon, but they hadn't seen anyone in ages. It was as if the nothing existed but the pair of them, making their way through the country, down the ocean path.

'You been watching the news, Dad?'

Frank had been enjoying the silence, content to ruminate within his own thoughts. It hadn't been of the uncomfortable type, at least, not to him. No, they just hadn't needed to say anything. Each other's company had been enough.

'They've really been dragging out Hussein's trial. It's a load of shit really, we all know what's gonna happen. I mean, it's obviously a sham.'

Frank was indifferent. Wars never really seemed to end, there was always some new conflict born out of the old. The atrocities of war were still depressing, but they were numerous, and no longer surprising. Another generation would have to sort it out; Frank was done participating.

Jonathan kept talking.

'Now, I'm not saying I support or defend him, the actions of his administration are reprehensible. What I *am* saying, is that this isn't a clear cut case of the good guys versus the bad guys. The governments we pay in tax have had a major role in hundreds of thousands of deaths. We all have a little blood on our hands.'

'Yeah Jon, sure. Whatever you say.'

Jonathan seemed to take the hint. He'd been a good kid, and had grown into a good man. He just didn't get people. He was always pushing something or another. It wasn't deliberate, but all the same, it got on people's nerves. He wasn't stupid either. What had the shrink called it? Arse Burgers? Frank had almost shat a brick, but it had all worked out in the end; Jon knew which team to bat for.

Frank tried to focus on the countryside, but couldn't ignore the shift in atmosphere. The silence was now uncomfortable. The scrub and ocean were no longer distracting, and Frank wished he hadn't said anything.

The weather could have been nicer, yet Frank had always appreciated dreary days. There was something about an overcast day that just made him feel content, like everyone was asleep, unaware of the world around them. Days like this, people paid him no mind, and Frank took pleasure in being ignored.

'Jon, here's as good as any. You might as well pull over.'

'Uh, sure Dad.'

Jon pulled off the highway, onto the grass. The next part was never enjoyable. Shifting from a car seat to the wheelchair always presented problems, and Jon's lack of nursing skills served to only exacerbate the process.

'Christ, Jon, not so rough.'

'Sorry, Dad. Hold on, there we go, easy does it. Okay, you right?'

Frank was seated again. Despite the usual pain in his legs, he was largely unhurt, with little to really complain about. He'd had worse in the past.

'Yeah, I'm okay son. Let's get going.'

Jon kept quiet and pushed the wheelchair up the cliff path. Frank appreciated this, allowing him the chance to focus on the sea breeze. He'd been in the home so long, he'd almost forgotten the cold, salty sting, the way it woke you up, the way it cleared the sinuses.

They stopped once they reached the edge, facing out towards the ocean. Frank pulled out his pouch and started to roll. Jon frowned, but said nothing.

'Would you deny a dying man his pleasures?'

'I said nothing, Dad. It was always your choice to light up.'

'Damn right.'

Frank put the smoke in his mouth, and set it alight. He gagged, but the sensation was heavenly. Jon sniffed, and his frown became more pronounced.

'Pot? Seriously?'

Frank turned his head, a huge shit-eating grin smeared across his face.

'It feels great. Too bad you're driving, I'd have offered you some.' Jon tried yanking it away, only to receive a blow to the face.

'I dare you try that again,' said Frank, taking another hit. 'It's been far too long since I've had this shit.'

Jon just sat there this time, irritated and sullen.

'Don't act like you've never had a puff before. My memory may be shit, but I still remember your teen years.'

'What if you have another stroke, huh? Right here, right now? Is that how you're planning to go? You *know* those aren't painless.' Jon was angry. Frank supposed he was entitled to that.

'It's my decrepit, dying body. What's the point anyways? Just let me have some peace.'

‘The fact that there is no point is the point. You can still change your mind Dad. You don’t have to go through with this, we can turn back, go home.’

Frank shifted around uncomfortably.

‘That’s just it — I can’t. Our political leaders pander to religious fanatics who believe the drugs I need are immoral, therefore I must suffer. And I’m so sick of suffering. The pain is unbearable, but still, I bear it.’

Jon said nothing, just sat there, watching the waves roll in. Frank continued.

‘You want to talk about a lack of points? When your mother, God rest her soul, was pregnant with you, I was serving on the *Voyager*. Talk about a waste of life. Eighty-two dead, all a result of sheer incompetence.’

‘Yeah, I know Dad. I’ve heard the story before.’

Frank turned his head, the corners of his mouth twitching. He spoke slowly.

‘You did, huh? Funny, I thought you’d have a little more respect if that’s the truth. They were good men, they didn’t deserve their fates. If it hadn’t been for Buck Rogers, I wouldn’t have made it out myself. True hero, him. As I froze my arse off, treading water in the dark, I wasn’t sure if rescue would make it in time. Not me, but for my mates. Because of people like Rogers, I’m here today. I got to live the life he — they — didn’t.’

‘I’m sorry son, I didn’t mean to snap. I’m old, I’m tired. But that’s my point. This isn’t as tragic as you’d make it out to be. *I’ve lived my life*. I’ve achieved everything I wanted to. We’re just waiting for the next stroke or two anyways, it’s not like I have all that much longer.’

Jon got up, avoiding his father’s eye. He still had the luxury of mobility.

‘But you don’t know that, Dad. We could still have a few more years together. I don’t — I don’t think I’m ready to let you go. And what do I say to people? How am I suppose to explain this to the kids? I sat there, watched Grandpa kill himself?’

‘You tell ‘em the truth, when they’re old enough. Until then, you stick with the “official” story. I passed out on our trip down the country, and by the time you got me back to town, it was too late. I’m old, these things happen.’

Frank was trying to be gentle. It wasn’t his forte.

‘Look Jon, I ... I love you. I’m in pain, and it’s not going to get better. You’ve seen it, I’m getting worse as the days roll by.’

‘Yeah, I know, Dad. It’s just ... God, this is hard.’

Jon started pacing. Frank looked down at to his hands.

‘Remember that girl you used to date? That one you wanted to top yourself over when she ended it?’

‘Jesus, Dad, this isn’t the ti—’

‘What was her name again? Amy? Annie?’

‘Alice. Her name was Alice.’ Frank smirked.

‘Aah, that’s right. Big-titted Alice.’ Jon swore, Frank kept smirking.

‘You thought it was all over when she left you. But it wasn’t. You’re still here today. It’s just like that, you’ll be okay with this too. Maybe not for a while. But eventually.’

Jon turned around. He looked defeated, too far gone for tears. Frank kept wearing the smirk, despite his feelings.

‘How you doing, Jon? You okay?’

It took him a few moments to respond. When he did, Jon struggled to get the words out, as though were caught in his throat.

‘I — I know you’re right. I know — I know this what you want, even if I have my own reservations. God, okay, I’m ready. Go ahead Dad, it’s your life. Your death.’

Frank looked him in the eye. Just like that, they knew that it was over.

‘Thanks son. I really needed to hear that.’

Frank fumbled in to his pockets, pulled out his pouch, and started rolling again. Lighting up, he took his final drag. Bud never tasted so good.

‘So how are you intending to do this anyway? Smoke for another stroke?’ Jon had at least managed to crack a smile as spoke.

‘It’s probably best if you don’t know the specifics, but you’d be surprised at what plants you can find on the internet these days. Some very potent, *legal* stuff on there. Crazy, right?’

Frank reached back in to his pocket and pulled out a small vial. He took it all in one swig, gagging.

‘You know, it’s supposed to kill your vision first. After that, breathing becomes difficult. You feel giddy. Euphoric. That should be good. I think I might close my eyes now, I don’t want to watch my vision go.’ Frank started coughing. ‘You’re — you’re supposed to get drowsy. Then just pass out. Effects are immediate.’

The coughing was getting worse. Jon forced himself to watch.

‘Any last words of wisdom? Spend — spend more time with your kids Jon. You won’t realise how little — how little time you have ‘til you’re my age. I was a young man once. Where did all the time go? Old age, it snuck up on me. Was I always this asleep?’

Frank covered his eyes with hands, leaning over. Jon wanted to help him, but didn’t know how, and ended up not moving, doing nothing.

‘When I was a boy, I’d play with my father. He died so long ago. I wonder how he’d feel about this. He was the never the

type — the type to — the type to what? I don't know. Did he know? Jon?

'Dad?' Jon, looked at him, and asked again. 'Dad?'

His father didn't reply. He stayed still, slumped in his chair. Jon headed down the coast line.

It felt like half an hour had passed, when he felt he should head back. He wasn't really sure. His thoughts were a mess.

What would he do now? How close was the nearest hospital? Could they even do anything to save him? His father had already been in a pretty bad way. Attempts to save him might just actually kill him. He'd save his grief till he got there, it needed to look genuine. His father was still slouched over when he got back. He finally looked peaceful, and Jon didn't want to disturb him. He checked his pulse. Beating, but faint. Wheeling him back to the car, something clicked, and Jon understood; either way, none of it really mattered anymore. Like the tears on his face, his choice had become clear.