

**THE EXTRA ORDINARY
LIFE OF FRANK DERRICK,
AGE 81**

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PAN BOOKS

PROLOGUE

I'm eighty-one.

I'm probably supposed to be saying that a lot now.

Ooh, look at you. And how old are you?

I'm eighty-one. That sort of thing.

Sometimes not even waiting to be asked.

I'm eighty-one.

Proudly offering the information at every opportunity, like when I was five years old.

Perhaps I should wear a badge. Like the ones you get stuck on the front of a birthday card. An eighty-first birthday card – if such a thing exists. Do they even make those? Eighty, maybe, but eighty-one? Maybe I could hang some balloons with '81' printed on them above my front door. But there's probably no market for eighty-first birthday balloons either. I'll just have to keep saying it.

I'm eighty-one.

Come inside. Have a seat. Why don't you talk down to me like you did when I was a child? See how my faculties are. Talk to me in a loud baby voice. Get me to fill in a form. Better still, you fill it in for me. Just get me to sign it. I'm probably too blind to read any small print. Sell me things I don't want. Look around for antiques. Case the joint.

I'm eighty-one.

Come and have a go, if you think you're hard enough.

1

On Frank Derrick's eighty-first birthday he was run over by a milk float. He would have preferred a book token or some cufflinks, but it's the thought that counts.

The milk float was travelling at about five miles an hour when the milkman somehow lost control of the slow-moving vehicle, mounting the narrow pavement and coming to a stop, with the wheels of the milk float in the air, on the low stone wall at the front of someone's garden, sending crates of milk, empty bottles, cartons of cream and a few dozen eggs sliding off the back and onto the pavement.

Aside from making a mess of the garden of one of the expected big hitters in the upcoming Villages in Bloom competition, the milkman hadn't done Frank any favours either. He was underneath the vehicle. The only part of his body visible to the outside world was his right arm, sticking out from underneath the milk float, his palm facing upwards, still holding on to the pint of milk he'd just been to Fullwind Food & Wine to buy. It was exactly what the scene really needed – more milk. The upended milk float, protruding pensioner's arm and the steady stream of dairy produce floating down the gutter at the side of the road was

like a spoof news story waiting for a punch line at the end of an episode of *The Two Ronnies*.

Frank was in hospital for three days. He had concussion, a broken arm and an acute fracture of one of the metatarsal bones in his left foot.

‘Like the footballers get,’ the doctor said. ‘Do you play football?’

‘Not any more. Not with this metatarsal injury.’

‘Well, anyhow. It should respond well to some fairly simple self-care techniques. RICE therapy.’

‘Ice therapy?’

‘No, rice.’

‘I don’t like rice. Never have.’

‘No. RICE. It’s an acronym. Rest, ice, compression and elevation.’

‘An acronym?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Like the stroke one?’

‘Like the stroke one,’ the doctor said. ‘I’ll find you a leaflet.’

Frank also had a broken toe – the one next to his big toe, the little piggy that stayed at home, which was also his prognosis: to stay at home. He had a few cuts, some tyre marks and bruising, and a face like squashed fruit. He looked like one of those horrific newspaper photographs of a mugged pensioner.

‘One or two of these cuts on your face may scar,’ the doctor said.

‘When you get to my age every cut is a scar.’

Frank’s right arm was in plaster from the wrist to just past his elbow. They’d set his arm at an angle. Like in a

cartoon. His arm would be stuck in a curve for at least six weeks. He looked like he was permanently trying to shake hands with everyone. If you'd sawed his arm off at the shoulder and thrown it, it would have come back.

Before he left hospital Frank had to take the Mini Mental State Examination to check his cognitive state. A young and exhausted-looking doctor in a striped shirt with a plain collar and sweat patches under just the left armpit pulled up a plastic chair next to Frank's hospital bed and flipped open an A4 pad of paper.

'Right, Frank,' he said. 'This test is a standard test. Some of the questions are probably going to seem a bit easy and some of them less so. Are you ready?'

The doctor asked Frank what year it was, what season, what month and the date and day of the week. Frank got them all right – although the doctor didn't say so. He just wrote stuff down and asked another question.

'What country are we in?'

'England.'

'What city?'

'Technically, it's a town.'

'You seem quite angry, Mr Derrick.'

'I was run over by a milkman. How's your day been?'

'Yes. I see,' the doctor said.

'I just want to go home before I catch MMSE.'

'That stands for Mini Mental State Examination, Mr Derrick. That's what we're doing now. I think you mean MRSA.'

'What does that stand for?'

'Deep breath,' the doctor said and he took a deep breath. 'Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus.' He smiled,

pleased with himself as though he'd successfully pronounced the name of that famous Welsh railway station. 'Now, shall we get to the end of the test?'

The doctor asked if Frank knew where he was and the name of the hospital and what ward they were on. Frank only passed on the name of the ward. The Mastermind trophy was as good as in the bag; he was picturing a place for it on the mantelpiece next to three porcelain penguins he'd never really liked that much. He was convinced the middle one was plotting a coup.

'Now, Frank, I'm going to name three objects and I want you to repeat them back to me and try to remember them, okay?'

Frank nodded. It hurt his head.

'Apple, pen, table,' the doctor said.

'Apple, pen, table.'

The doctor asked Frank to spell WORLD backwards and Frank said something about how it certainly was a backwards world. The doctor asked him to subtract seven from a hundred and then seven from the answer and to carry on doing so till he told him to stop. Frank made it as far as fifty-one and was a bit disappointed when the doctor said that was enough. He'd never been great at maths and thought that maybe the bang on the head had actually done him some good.

'Can you tell me who the Prime Minister is?'

Frank told the doctor who the Prime Minister was and that he thought he was an idiot and that he, for one, had definitely not voted for him. The doctor said that wasn't important.

'Oh, but it's very important.'

‘Great,’ the doctor said, but he didn’t mean that it was great at all and he skipped a couple of questions to make the test end sooner. He wanted Frank to go home as well. The doctor wanted to go home. Everyone in the hospital wanted to go home. Who wants to be in a hospital?

‘Can you remember the three objects I asked you to name earlier?’ the doctor said.

‘You mean the apple, the pen and the table?’

The doctor pointed at his wristwatch and asked Frank what it was.

‘It looks like quite a cheap wristwatch.’

The doctor wanted to punch Frank. If it wasn’t so frowned upon in his profession, perhaps he would have done.

There were a few more questions and a couple of physical tests, including folding a piece of paper and then unfolding it again and writing a sentence on the piece of paper. Frank wrote, ‘Can I go home now please?’

Later that day he was discharged from hospital. As the porter wheeled him to the lifts a nurse handed him a walking stick that he’d tried to leave behind when she’d given it to him earlier and a carrier bag containing his carton of milk. The milk had been out of the fridge for three days now and it was warm and probably turned into cottage cheese or clotted cream. Frank thanked the nurse and planned on leaving the bag in the ambulance on the way home.

After the accident Frank’s daughter offered to immediately drop everything and fly back from America to look after him but Frank said there was no need, she had far more important things to do, she had her own life to live, her own family to look after, he’d be fine, it didn’t even hurt

that much, it was too far, don't be silly, it would cost too much, all that kind of bollocks. What he really wanted her to do was hang up the phone and get a cab to the airport.

'Let me at least arrange for somebody to come in and look after you,' she said.

'I can look after myself.'

'Let me do some research online. Make a couple of phone calls. Just to see what the options are.'

'Really, there is no need. It will cost a fortune. I'm fine. I've had worse hangovers.'

'Dad.'

'Don't you have crime reconstruction shows in America? They'll tie me to a chair and steal my pension.'

'Dad.'

'They'll use my water tank as a toilet. Actually, that might be plumbers.'

'Let me at least look into it. For my peace of mind, Dad. I don't want to worry about whether you've got enough food or if you've set fire to the house making toast.'

'Do you realise how much work I've put into keeping people out of my home? Word will get out. If I let Robin Williams in a dress come inside to strap me to a chair and steal my antiques, I'll have a queue of boiler insurance salesmen and equity release people halfway up the road.'

'Dad.'

'I'll have to get a revolving door fitted. I'm sure there'll be somebody in the queue willing to sell me one. And once I've let in all the people who want to get inside my flat, what about all the people who want to get on top of it? That queue will stretch for miles. You'll be able to join the back of it without leaving California.'

It was true. People were keen to get on Frank's roof. His flat had something that there weren't a lot of in Fullwind-on-Sea: stairs. Fourteen of them. Making him the go-to guy for stair-lift companies, window cleaners, gutter clearers, chimney sweeps and roofers. Hardly a week went by without him having to make his way down those fourteen stairs to answer the door to a man sucking his teeth and shaking his head.

'You do realise your roof is about to fall off?' Teeth-suck.

'Your chimney is listing to the left.' Head-shake.

'Have you seen how bunged up your guttering is?' Teeth-suck. Head-shake.

Maybe his roof *was* about to collapse, but if he did let somebody up there, he wouldn't be able to see what they were doing without walking fifty yards up the road with a pair of strong binoculars. He'd have no idea if they were actually fixing anything. They could be reading the newspaper or having a nap, or simply counting to fifteen thousand and then climbing back down to suck their teeth a bit more before presenting him with a bill for a million pounds.

Frank carried on telling Beth why he didn't need any help and about not wanting strangers in his home and she didn't interrupt. She let her dad complain because she knew it would make him feel better about the inevitable outcome – which was giving his daughter what she wanted. In this case, she wanted her dad to be safe and well.

He ranted a bit more and then he said, 'I'm not going to tidy up. I'm not lighting candles and brewing fresh coffee.'

'Of course not.'

The following day a man with an annoying whistle from the care company screwed a key safe to the outside wall of

Frank's flat. He put a front-door key inside the safe and programmed Frank's birthday into the combination lock. Three days after that, in the middle of one of the hottest springs since records began, less than a month after Frank had finally got round to putting the fairy lights and tinsel back in the loft, Christmas came to Fullwind-on-Sea.

2

When Kelly Christmas parked her little blue car opposite Frank's flat for the first time, with two wheels up on the grass verge, bumping into one of the white concrete bollards that were there to prevent people from parking on the grass verge, she did so in front of one of the largest captive audiences in the South of England.

A lot of people were at home on Sea Lane that day. A lot of nosy neighbours and bored pensioners, housebound by agoraphobia or because it was too hot to go outside or because they were waiting for hip replacements or for their mobility scooters to fully charge or because the free bus to the big Sainsbury's doesn't always run on Mondays. The crunching of the gears as Kelly tried to find reverse was a reveille for everyone to abandon their word searches and daytime auction shows and get to their windows.

As the only stair-rich person on the street, Frank had the best view. Every other building on Sea Lane was a bungalow. People were cricking their necks down in the cheap seats – which were actually more expensive – looking for something to stand on so that they could see who was making all the noise, furrowing tyre tracks into the grass and threatening Fullwind's chances of a rosette if a judge

from the Villages in Bloom competition turned up unannounced.

Frank watched the little blue car shift backwards and forwards on the verge opposite until it finally hit a concrete bollard. And then whoever was behind the wheel grew bored with parking, or perhaps they decided that it was the best they were going to be able to manage, or maybe they simply ran out of petrol.

He couldn't see the driver's face yet. He could just about make out that they had a face. Frank was 90 per cent certain that it was a woman. Maybe 95. She was nodding her head up and down and singing along with whatever music was playing on the car stereo. She checked her hair in the rear-view mirror until she seemed happy enough with the way it looked to stop checking it.

At a quarter past eleven, the car door opened and the driver stepped out onto the grass verge and all the curtain twitchers and Venetian blind twiddlers tripped over their furniture and popped their new hips trying to see who it was. From up on the first floor Frank watched her put a 'Nurse on Call' sign in the windscreen of the car, lock the doors and walk across the road.

By the time she reached his front gate he could see the hair that she'd been checking in the mirror. Her fringe was cut perfectly straight. It underlined the top of her head, drawing attention to her face. She didn't look as much like Robin Williams as he was expecting. And less like Margaret Thatcher or that woman from the James Bond film with the knives in her shoes, who also fitted Frank's expected image of a home help nurse. He immediately regretted the dirty protest he'd been carrying out for the past five days.

Although Frank had agreed that Beth would pay someone to come round once a week for three months to tidy up, check he was taking his painkillers and stick a thermometer in his mouth (he hoped it was his mouth), he hadn't said he wouldn't do his best to make sure they didn't get too comfortable and feel like hanging around long enough to steal his wallet or do a poo in the kettle.

For the next five days Frank slept in his clothes. He didn't shave and his long white hair had started to dreadlock. He left his teeth in a glass in the bathroom and dirty dishes piled up in the sink. He deliberately dropped cake and biscuit crumbs on the living-room carpet. There were DVDs out of their boxes on the floor and – his *pièce de résistance* – he hadn't flushed the toilet for two days.

The first time Kelly saw Frank he was in the hallway where he'd collapsed like Bambi while trying to make it to the toilet to flush it before she managed to force the front door over the hill of free newspapers and junk mail that had accumulated behind it. When Kelly appeared in the hall at the top of the stairs Frank had just made it back up onto his feet. He was out of breath and sweating, wearing slept-in clothes, all wild-haired and hairy-faced, looking like a black-and-white photograph on one of the many charity begging letters that came through his letterbox every week.

'Mr Derrick?' Kelly said. 'I'm Kelly.' She pulled her thin blue anorak to one side and lifted the badge on the front of her blue uniform to show him. She gave him enough time to read her name. 'You look a bit flustered. Shall we go and sit down?' She placed a hand on his good arm. Her touch was gentle and reassuring, firm but caring, calm but in control; all these things. She was like a hostage negotiator at a bank

siege or a cowboy calming an angry horse. Kelly the pensioner whisperer. She led Frank quietly into the living room.

‘Armchair or sofa?’ she said.

‘Armchair please. You’ll have to excuse the mess,’ he said, referring to himself as much as he was to the living-room carpet.

‘You should see my flat,’ Kelly said. ‘You’d call the police to report a burglary.’

Frank sat down. He was breathing deeply.

‘You sit there for a bit,’ Kelly said, ‘and I’ll make some tea. Or coffee? Which do you prefer?’

‘Yes,’ Frank said. ‘Thank you. Tea please.’ He offered to show her where everything was kept but Kelly said not to worry.

‘People tend to keep things in the same place in their kitchens,’ she said.

While Kelly was in the kitchen, Frank sat back in his armchair and continued to make excuses for the mess.

‘I was in a traffic accident,’ he called out. Without his false teeth in, his speech was slurred. She probably thought he sounded as drunk as he looked.

‘I know,’ Kelly called out from the kitchen. ‘Do you have milk and sugar?’

Frank wondered if she was making a comical reference to his accident.

‘Just milk, thank you.’

While the kettle boiled Kelly came into the living room and picked up all the dirty plates and cups.

‘I haven’t had the chance to tidy up,’ Frank said.

‘That’s all right,’ Kelly said. She took the dirty dishes out

to the kitchen. Frank wanted to get his teeth from the bathroom and flush the toilet but he was still feeling lightheaded and thought he might fall over again. She came back in and picked up the DVD cases from the carpet and put them on the table.

‘I’ll leave these for you to put away,’ she said. ‘In case you have a system.’

He had a system.

Frank’s alphabetised DVD collection was the only properly organised part of his life. It had taken him quite a while to do. Mainly because he’d spent so much of the time doing impressions of the actors in the films as he rearranged them – from cockney Michael Caine in *Alfie* to posh Michael Caine in *Zulu*.

Kelly brought Frank a cup of tea and put it on the table next to his armchair. She sat down on the sofa and took a wad of A4 notes out of her bag.

‘Let’s have a look at your care plan.’

While she read through her notes she asked Frank how he’d been feeling since he’d come home from the hospital, if he felt he was managing and if there was anything in particular he needed help with that hadn’t already been arranged with his daughter.

Frank said he couldn’t think of anything.

‘I’ll have a bit of a tidy and make your bed and you see if you can think of anything else in the meantime,’ Kelly said.

While she was out of the room, Frank sat and looked at his reflection on the blank TV screen. He looked like Howard Hughes. It had taken ten years and millions of dollars for Howard Hughes to end up looking like that,

Frank thought. And he had managed it without trying, in less than a week for no money whatsoever.

He could hear Kelly in his bedroom, singing quietly to herself. He heard her shutting the wardrobe door and drawing the curtains and then what sounded like her fluffing the pillows, and although it was obviously unlikely because there were two walls between them, Frank thought he felt a waft of air as she flapped the quilt into place on his bed. She sneezed three times, there was a ten-second pause when Frank imagined she was trying to stifle a fourth sneeze and then she sneezed again. On her way back to the living room she flushed the toilet.

‘I think the pollen count is high today,’ Kelly said when she came back into the living room.

After she’d checked again that Frank was definitely all right and safe to be left alone, she started to collect her things together to leave.

‘I can go to the shops for you on the way here next time, if there’s anything you need,’ she said, while Frank signed a time sheet to prove that she’d been there. His broken-armed signature looking like an unconvincing forgery, the ink lines wavering up and down the page like the polygraph of somebody telling an enormous lie. She put the time sheet back in her bag.

‘I’ll see you at the same time next week, Mr Derrick.’

‘Yes, thank you. It will be you again, will it?’

‘Yes,’ Kelly said. ‘Me, I’m afraid. Every week for the next –’ she took a diary out of her bag and flipped a few pages over – ‘twelve weeks.’

She told him to ring the care company if he had any questions or if there was something in particular he’d like

her to do on her next visit. She put her diary and the rest of her paperwork back in her bag, said goodbye and left.

Frank was surprised how sorry he was to see her go. The flat felt emptier than it had before she'd arrived. Was it always this quiet? He switched the TV on to fill the silence and to get rid of his reflection.

While he watched a mother and daughter on television in matching fleece tops lose money selling their family heirlooms at an auction, Frank wished he'd had his teeth in so that he could have talked more freely while Kelly was there. He wanted to tell her that he was usually a lot funnier than this. He wanted to apologise about the mess again. And he wanted to say that if she was going to be coming here every week from now on, she was going to have to start calling him Frank because he hated it when people called him Mr Derrick. It made him feel like he should be working with Basil Brush.