

1. Frank's Monstrosity

They were building a massive construction on the reclaimed land beyond Moolanong Tip and nobody seemed to know what it was. First they put up a high wooden fence around the area so that it was impossible to tell when the reclamation ended and the construction began, but once the structure began to appear above the fence-line, the men began to wonder. So did Lyle Tynan.

There had been nothing in the local paper nor any of the other media. No one mentioned anyone getting planning permits. The only clue was that, at various points along the fence, the name Overton Industries was emblazoned, and Lyle knew from experience that since Frank Overton bragged in the media about his every achievement, the silence surrounding this construction was utterly ominous.

People who came to the tip asked. "What the bloody hell's that?"

"Buggered if I know," was the only possible answer.

It soon became evident that it was no ordinary structure, as the framework towered and began to take on abstract forms that no normal building could have acquired. It looked rather like some gigantic mechanical octopus had walked in from the sea, and had taken root at this remote place.

It was the very mysteriousness of it that caused the men to begin to worry. They hung about the gates and asked the workers questions but got no answers. They complained to the union and were met with a helpless shrug. Frank Overton was building his own structure to his own designs on his own land far from any built-up area and all environmental and urban planning permissions had been granted and were above board and the workers were well paid and happy, so there was nothing they could do.

Frank's Monstrosity, as it had become called, grew and grew, towering a hundred metres above the landscape and occupying a square kilometre in area, and once more the men gathered at the office near the entrance to the tip and muttered to each other in great agitation.

Lyle watched them as he worked, ramming the bulldozer into the heaps of garbage and piling them higher. He didn't need to be there to know what they were on about, and didn't need to go over because he knew they would come to him. He just kept on working, the way they should have, setting an example that would have had them cringing with guilt. He roared the engine of a bulldozer and rammed another pile, in his eternal quest to bring order to the chaos of Moolanong Garbage Tip.

They came soon enough, in several determined bunches, walking down the rows between the piles of garbage, causing the white carpet of seagulls to lift off here and there and then settle to their ceaseless scavenging again, like the corner of a rug picked up momentarily by a breeze.

He let them walk all the way up to him before he stopped working. He halted the bulldozer only when they were gathered all around it. He lowered the blade with a pneumatic sigh and finally switched the engine off. They had to wait for the wind to carry the cloud of dust away before anyone could speak.

Lyle swung around in the seat to face toward them, jamming his boot into the superstructure and leaning his elbow on his knee. With his free hand, he adjusted the old cloth beret on his baldhead, wiping away the sweat, and grit as he did so.

His eyes were squinted and his teeth were clenched, tightening his face against a troubled day of unsettling wind that rustled into everything, stirring up combustibles and tempers.

They assembled below him, their own faces twisted as they tilted their heads upward, trying to meet his gaze. They were all there, Lyle saw—the drivers, the runners, the yardmen, and Ronnie Dawkins who was the clerk from the office at the gate. Thirteen of them in all—an unlucky number, although, Lyle knew, that wasn't counting himself.

"Awright, you blokes," Lyle's great voice boomed down upon them. "What's the go?"

"We wanna talk ter yer, Lyle," Ronnie Dawkins called back.

"I can see that," Lyle answered. "What about?"

"That!" several of their voices roared, and their fingers jabbed back behind them, as if Lyle did not know where to look.

Lyle looked that way, toward the construction site. He recalled a story he had been forced to read at school, about an ancient war, and right now he did feel much the way the Trojans must have, gazing from their ramparts out across the plains and watching the Greeks build what for all the world appeared to be a giant horse.

But Lyle was the boss of the crew, and his job was to keep things moving in the yard.

"What about it?" he gruffly asked them.

"We reckon we know what it is," Wally Pearson, the most experienced of the drivers, said.

"You been sayin' that fer months now, Wally, and change yer story every week. Who told yer this one?"

"Nobody. We figgered it out fer ourselves."

"You figgered it out fer yerselves," Lyle echoed dubiously. "And I s'pose all that figgerin's how you blokes ended up shiftin' garbage for a livin'."

"Aw, come on, Lyle. Give us a go," Dawkins pleaded.

"Awright," Lyle groaned. "Wadda yer reckon it is this time?"

And Dawkins prodded Pearson, and others prodded others, but none of them wanted to be the one to speak. That was the trouble—that they were such a spineless lot.

"Come on, Wally," Lyle growled. "Yer the one with all the bright ideas. Let's hear it."

He could see Wally squirm with intimidation. "Well, I was watchin' the news on telly last night, and they was talkin' about this big plant they're gonna build. It's fer research into all these dangerous viruses..."

Lyle groaned. "Yeah, yeah. I saw it too. It's for fucking foot-and-mouth and bloody sheep ticks, you fuckin' dick-head! Stuff that animals get, not people!"

"But it still must be pretty fuckin' dangerous," Wally protested.

"But they're buildin' the fuckin' place at Geelong," Lyle roared. "That's a hundred fuckin' kilos from here!"

They all looked around, squinting and flinching with distaste at what they knew to be right. Still, they weren't giving in just yet—that was promising.

"But it still might be somethin' like that, Lyle. I mean, if they was building some research plant fer dangerous virus's here, well they sure wouldn't tell anyone about it, would they?"

"No Wally, I s'pose they wouldn't," Lyle said, shaking his great head in dismay. "And that's what you reckon' it is, hey?"

"Somethin' like that, I reckon."

“Bullshit!” Big Lyle Tynan roared.

The very foundations of the construction might have been shaken by the shock wave of such a bellow.

Lyle raised himself wearily off the seat of the bulldozer and stepped his way down into their midst. For vacating his dominant position, still he didn't seem to tower over them any less. Big Lyle Tynan was a mighty man, a head taller than most with arms the size of a normal man's legs and a great barrel chest from which his colossal voice boomed. At fifty-nine there was a slight flabbiness about the huge muscles that bulged all over his body, the legacy of thirty year's hard labour, although he had committed no crime except being poor.

And it was times like this that he might have been feeling every painful minute of it.

“Now you blokes listen to me,” he said, quietly now that he stood amongst them. “I been readin' newspapers and lookin' at books and watchin' borin' documentaries on the telly because I'm just as bloody worried about that fuckin' thing as you are. So I know a few things about it, see?”

They were silent, their passion dissipated, their heads hung, shamefaced now.

“Now, all that scientific research stuff is done in places that might look pretty strange on the inside, but on the outside they look like pretty ordinary buildings. And that thing over there—that ain't no ordinary building.”

It wasn't either—the maze of strangely angular superstructure amid the frame and its four giant concrete pillars of legs made that plain enough. Though none of them needed to look to know he was right. “Have a fuckin' look at it,” Big Lyle said, and then they all looked right enough. “You just gotta look at it to see its a machine of some sort—a processing plant for minerals or foodstuffs—somethin' like that. That's what it is.”

“That's what we reckoned in the first place, Lyle. And you said that was bullshit too.”

“Yeah,” Lyle said ruefully. “Well it ain't an Agent Orange makin' plant like you said it was last week, and it ain't an American Tracking Station like you said it was the week before, and it ain't an Atomic Reactor like you reckoned it was the week before that...”

“So what is it, Lyle?” Wally Pearson had to ask.

And Lyle offered them one of his rather rare smiles.

“Fucked if I know,” he said.

They could laugh, briefly, foolishly—it was their own skittishness that they were laughing at mostly. Big strong men, scared of shadows.

Lyle turned, facing them chest on.

“Now are you blokes gonna forget it, and get back to fuckin' work?”

They all looked at each other. No one moved. A mob of bloody sheep, they all waited for each other to decide a direction. Resolute sheep, apparently...

“No, Lyle,” Ronnie Dawkins barely murmured. “We ain't.”

Lyle met his gaze for a long tense moment, trying to break him down by sheer force of presence.

Ronnie was the shop steward—he had fired them up with this latest nonsense. Now, Lyle had to know whether he was going to back down.

“Why not, Ronnie?”

“We can't, Lyle. Can't let it go on. I mean, shit—they're bein' secret about it, so there must be somethin' they don't want us to know. And why would they build it way out here, away from the houses, if it weren't dangerous? That's what we want to know.”

And they all murmured affirmatively about that.

It was far from the first time that they were all fired up like this, and when it came to the crunch, they always backed down. Lyle had to be sure that wouldn't happen again.

"Good cheap land, that old swamp," he said, to tempt them.

"But there ain't no minerals way out here," Wally Pearson went on because Ronnie seemed to have exhausted himself. "Hard place to get to. There's plenty of better places they coulda built it, if they wanted."

"But it still don't have nothin' ter do with us," Lyle insisted. "If there's some sort of dangerous pollution, we'll hear about it soon enough. So why don't we just wait and see."

"Because we got a right to know, Lyle, if there's gonna be some sort of danger."

"And if there is?"

"Then we make 'em build it someplace else."

"I think the job has gone a bit far for that to happen."

"Then we'll have to make Frank move the bloody tip."

"And how do yer reckon yer gonna do that?"

"We'll bring the union down on his neck," Ronnie Dawkins cried.

Right on cue. It was bloody marvellous. Lyle laughed. There was nothing else he could do in the face of so fatuous a threat.

"No, fair dinkum, Lyle," Dawkins blubbered. "The Union's real hot on this anti-pollution stuff. There's that claim fer them blokes what got cancer at Waverley, from makin' asbestos. And that chemical plant they got shut down in Yarraville. They'll be right behind us this time."

"Yeah, just like they were last time, Ronnie," Lyle said bitterly.

"Aw, come on, Lyle. That was different. It wasn't my fault."

"Not sayin' it was, Ronnie. But look what happened. I go to Frank with your list of demands and tell him to meet 'em or else we all go out on strike. Frank knocks me back. And what happens? Sweet fuck all."

"That was because Bannister couldn't get the other branches of the union to support our strike action."

"That was because Frank paid the union bosses not to try very hard."

"You don't know that that's true, Lyle."

"I don't know that it isn't true either. All I know is, there I was, out on strike, all on me pat malone."

"It won't happen again, Lyle."

"You bet it won't."

Lyle could see the desperation now in Ronnie Dawkins face. A man who badly needed to win one, for a change. And the others. They had failed him before. They weren't going to let it happen again.

"Look, Lyle," Ronnie said. "I've been talkin' ter Bannister this morning. After the way you got stuck into him last time, he ain't gonna cross you again."

Last time, Lyle had stormed the local branch of the union, and in the course of negotiations \$2000 worth of damage had been done to the furniture and fittings in Mike Bannister's office. The story was that the bill had been sent to Frank, who gratefully paid. Certainly, Lyle had heard nothing further of it. No. Mike Bannister would not cross him again.

"Anyway," Ronnie Dawkins went on. "Bannister is under some pressure from higher

up in the union. He'll be on our side this time."

"I'm not sure whether that's good or bad," Lyle said, but then he sighed. "Awright, what do you want me to do?"

He could see the tension draining out of Dawkins face, as he realised that they had won the first and hardest battle. Or, at least, so Lyle hoped.

"You go to Frank Overton and ask him to hand over the plans of that thing," Ronnie said excitedly, jabbing his frenetic finger toward the construction site.

"And what makes you think Frank Overton will listen to me?"

"Come on, Lyle," Wally Pearson said slyly. "We all know you're an old mate of his."

"That was a bloody long time ago. He's a big man these days."

"He'll talk to you," Ronnie Dawkins knew. "He always does."

"Maybe," Lyle admitted. For it was true, even if Lyle often wished it wasn't.

"So maybe they'll let me in and I'll talk to him. And maybe he'll even listen. And what happens when he tells me to go and get fucked?" Lyle said reasonably.

"We come out, and we stay out, until he co-operates. And when we go, all the other yards will come out too. For as long as it takes. The whole city'll be piled so high with garbage it'll look just like this place by the time we're finished."

It was a threat that was cast several times a year, and had only ever been carried out once. And, Lyle could grimly reflect, it had been that occasion that had set Frank Overton on the road toward the lofty position that he occupied today.

Lyle had to be sure that they would not back down again. One by one, he confronted each of them, and asked them to state out loud their determination to go through with it, and one by one they complied. And, as each man did, so the smile broadened on Ronnie Dawkins' face.

"You see, Lyle? We really mean it this time."

Though Lyle still eyed him with the utmost doubt.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Awright. But listen to this. While I'm gone, I want you blokes to clean this place up, and put all the vehicles equipment away. Get those fires put out. Get the whole place ready to shut down, and then wait in the office. I'll call you if we're going out. Then I'm coming back here, and there better not be any one of you within miles of this place..."

"Don't you want us to picket the gate?"

"You heard what I said."

They heard. They might have been ready to rush off right then. "So you're going to see Frank," Ronnie Dawkins asked, as if he could not quite believe it.

"Yep," Lyle said, and then he smiled. "But I'm going to see Mike Bannister first."