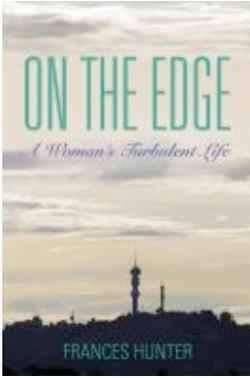


ON THE EDGE

A Woman's Turbulent Life

FRANCES HUNTER



*A life-affirming literary adventure, *On the Edge* shares the journey of the author's life from London to Northern Rhodesia, and then to South Africa under the oppressive apartheid government, where she raised her children, divorced, worked as a journalist and social worker, and rejoiced in becoming a writer. The book, in a rich tapestry of memoir, memoir-based short stories, and poems, finally celebrates Nelson Mandela's election, and follows the author to the USA.*

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A Woman's Turbulent Life

FRANCES HUNTER

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This book includes memoir, memoir-based fiction and poetry. Real events are portrayed to the best of my ability, but memory is notoriously fallible: others may remember events differently. Some names have been changed. Readers should consider the fictional recreation of real events as the works of literature I intend them to be. Some events have been changed for dramatic effect.

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Don't Talk to Strangers

As far back as I can remember, they've been sticklers for doing the right thing, and I know what the right and proper thing is because they told me, "Children should be seen and not heard." And, "Don't talk with your mouth full." And, "Never make a scene in public." Sometimes, of course, they didn't need to tell me aloud. I heard their intention in my child-soul: *Your behaviour must always be a credit to us.*

Well, what's to be done? Tell them, of course. Imagine: *Mum, Dad, I have something to tell you . . .* then mind going blank.

I simply cannot tell them. I could leave London, go away with no forwarding address and vanish into one of those grey industrial cities to the north where they'd never find me. I could do that. If there was help, I could get a job up there, make a life, new friends. But, wait. They do care. How hard it would be for them never to know what had happened. Think of it: never to know if I'm alive or dead, never to have a body to bury. Cruel.

Hard for me too, whatever I decide, but I can't think about that now.

*

Right now, this room in Notting Hill Gate, half-underground, is my haven, although they wouldn't approve of it. When the sun shines, it bronzes the iron palings topped by trefoil spear-points. The fence keeps drunken pedestrians from toppling into the dank areaway outside my window. The air down here smells of dust, boiled cabbage and mould, almost like the loamy black soil for growing mushrooms. The landlady wouldn't like me to grow mushrooms: not proper behaviour, I know.

My landlady is the only person I've met. We don't talk. I put the rent money under her door upstairs; she puts my rent-book, signed, on the hall-stand just inside the front door. The other lodgers, students mostly, some colonials like me, come and go, always in a hurry. I don't think I've ever been so lonely.

Every morning, I climb grudgingly out of my snug bed and light a match to get the fire going. Shivering, I hold my clothes up to the grate to get some of the damp out of them before getting dressed. Must remember to save shillings for the gas meter. My pajama pants slide up, and my shins turn pink from sitting too close to the fire. Dressed, I go upstairs, take my turn for the bathroom, go downstairs again. The milk in the bottle on my window-sill stays cool and fresh. After cornflakes and tea, I go out and walk the streets, searching.

The red sanctuary light glows in Brompton Oratory. I used to walk past it every day before I gave up my job. I need to talk to someone; I need someone to advise me, but when I'm tempted to go in there, the image of a man in a black cassock comes to me, as forbidding as the façade of that building. I know what he would say.

Every day I walk to find my answer, walk these grimy streets, buildings besmirched by the industrial revolution, walk past craters, charred bomb sites, where homes once were. I wish I wasn't doing this. Although I'm walking, I'm still dithering.

Once, while I waited to cross a road, a man standing on the platform of a bus going slowly past called out to me, "Cheer up, ducks. It can't be that bad."

It is that bad, I wanted to say to him. Of course, I didn't, but the rest of that day and the days since then I remember him—an ordinary, slightly shabby man—and every time I think of him it's like the way—after a long hard winter—the first daffodils of spring lift your heart, and I wish I was the kind of girl who would rush up to the bus, jump on the platform and hug him in gratitude. Girls like me don't talk to strangers, never mind hug them.

Some days, rain pelts down, buckets down in the proverbial cats and dogs. I sometimes shelter briefly under a narrow parapet, then run and stand under an awning over a restaurant or hotel entrance, stand there as if waiting for someone to join me. After a while the doorman gives me dirty looks. When he's about to beckon a policeman, I give up and come back home. I light the gas in the fireplace, undress, dry myself, put on my flannel pajamas and hold my sodden clothes up to the blue flames to dry them for tomorrow.

Back in bed to keep warm while saving gas, eyes closed, I see myself on the screen of my eyelids back in the reference room of the North Kensington Library, see myself reading the words in the Encyclopaedia Britannica: five years of prison for me, eight years for him or her. I didn't know it was such a crime.

The risk! Do the other patrons innocently reading about what to plant in spring . . . do they hear my heart thumping in its cage of ribs, my heart trying to escape as I, myself, want to escape?

I can't confide in anyone, but that's not the only risk. I could even die. No. Can't think like that. But I can't look for another job until . . . In the evenings, I heat tomato soup from a can on the gas ring and toast a slice of bread at the grate to go with it.

Some days, the sky looks rosy through the iron fence when I wake: I'm late, so I leap out of bed, quickly make tea and toast.

I walk south from Notting Hill Gate, down to Church Street, and cross Kensington High Street. Usually I turn west, then south again on Earls Court Road, Finborough, and Gunter Grove. After that, sometimes I take New Kent Road, sometimes Wandsworth. Each day I take a bus to the point I left off walking the day before. Wandsworth Bridge lies ahead; I won't cross it; Battersea on the other side doesn't look promising.

There are a few days when the sun stays out, and I walk all day, walk with hope that I will track down my quarry, but darkness falls and with it my hopes for that day.

Some mornings, while I'm putting on my coat to go out, the rain starts again, and not just a gentle drizzle. I get back into bed

and huddle, head under the covers, all thought of walking gone, all thought in abeyance.

Sometimes, I confess, when the rain gets to me, I duck into a Lyon's Corner House. Although I have to conserve my savings, I pay for a cup of tea at the counter and stir a teaspoon of sugar into it. The teaspoon is attached by a chain to the counter, which must be a leftover custom from war-time and sugar rationing, seven years ago. Surrounded by the smell of damp woollen overcoats and the murmur of voices, I cup my hands around the heavy white ceramic cup to warm them.

If I don't succeed soon, the end of the week will be here. Another week gone by. I'm running out of time, and I'm getting more queasy and tired every day. My money is almost gone too. The king, George VI, died today, 6th February 1952—it's on all the newspaper placards—and the country is in mourning. Princess Elizabeth will be queen. Funny that I'm almost the same age as her little sister Margaret Rose.

What keeps me going is thinking of the doctor I had hoped would help. I made the appointment with his receptionist, saying I wasn't sick, I was new to the area and needed to speak to him about getting on his panel of patients. After a long time in the chilly waiting-room with people sniffing and coughing, I sat on the other side of his wide desk. He was affable, plump and pink, able to afford expensive restaurants, eat caviar. When he heard what I wanted, how his face changed! He rose from his chair, mouth opening and closing like a goldfish.

"Get out! Get out before I call the police."

Well, I'm not stupid: I know when a cause is hopeless. And I don't make scenes. I did get out with my head held high so the whole waiting room wouldn't know how I felt. At least, he didn't trick me into waiting until the police arrived.

Outside, at the bus stop, I thought about what to do next. The asphalt of the roadway was still dark from the night's rain. A middle aged man came to sit at the other end of the bench. From the paper bag he carried, he took out a two-inch heel of a bread

loaf. He broke it and tossed crumbs to the pigeons. They seemed to know him and had assembled.

“Take this and eat,” he said aloud to the grey and shimmering congregation at his feet. “Increase and multiply.”

You wouldn’t think London was already chock-full of pigeons, bird-shit whitening the head and shoulders of all the statues.

I sometimes wonder if I imagined this man. Who knows? There are odd people in every city.

The next best bet would be a chemist—similar to doctors—but since that pink and shining doctor’s threat, I bypass any number of Boot’s chemist shops, sparkling with cleanliness and rectitude, too dangerous to try.

I walk down the stairs into the underground, push through the turnstile, knowing I’m going into its maze of tunnels and rails below the frantic city, into the mixture of smells, coal dust, oil, the hot steel of the rails, cigarette smoke, unwashed humanity.

I am not going anywhere on the Tube train. I have simply come down here to be among people with a purpose, people who know where they are going and why, hoping it will brush off on me. I stand on a platform at Eaton Square station. People embark and disembark. Very orderly they are, British people, but it becomes too much: all the endless tributaries and distributaries of people coming and going about their business, not one of them seeing me as a person. This is what being in an ant colony underground would be like.

I go into the Ladies, push a penny into the brass box at the door of a cubicle. With my penny I am buying time to be alone. I sit on the lid of a toilet and read the writing on the walls. Enclosed in a heart, “JB loves LM” “Shirley Kent is a tart” “I want you Cedric please call.”

What would I write? Is there a way to express in words an anguished scream? No.

It will have to be enough to know that there are other people with something to say that they will not say aloud and that we try to leave our secrets in the underworld.

I think the die was cast after my true love said to me, “No, it’s impossible, I have to finish my studies, I can’t marry until I can afford to support a wife.” Very proper: that’s probably what he learned from *his* parents. Never mind that I came as a stranger to this country because he begged me to. Never mind that we once made our own springtime. A chunk of flesh torn from my chest. Hearts may mend, but mending trust is something else. It’ll soon be Valentine’s Day, patron saint of lovers. What a joke!

*

I walk farther than usual—not raining for a change—and get into a rundown part of town. I’d soon be in the slums by the look of it. I stroll three times past a seedy apothecary. The man standing behind the counter—must be the owner, a chemist—catches my eye the first time and seems to be waiting for each of my reappearances. He is the one. I cross to the other side of the road and linger in the doorway of a fish and chip shop, where I can watch his store-front. His assistant, a youngish woman, leaves. It must be closing time. She trots off on her high heels clickety-click down to the bus stop. I wait until the bus she enters whisks her off and around the next corner, out of sight. It is time.

I re-cross the road, stand outside the plate glass and look at him steadily through the large dusty bottles of red and green liquid on the shelf just inside, his window dressing. He returns my look with a long gaze of his own. He is waiting for me. We have never seen each other before, but we two, predator and prey, recognise our own. Which the predator? Which the prey?

He opens the door. “Why have you come?”

“I need your help.”

“Who told you to come to me?”

“No one told me.”

“Then why? Why me?”

“I saw your eyes . . . and you have a kind face.”

He gives me a wondering, distrustful look. He may turn me away. An ocean of time passes while I can only wait.

“Kind? Me?” he says finally. I see that, despite himself, he is moved. I did see kindness in his face, but it may be that no one has ever called him kind before. He will do what I ask.

“It will cost fifty pounds.”

“I don’t have that much.”

“What do you have?”

“Eight pounds.” I wait briefly while he considers. He mustn’t refuse. “I’ll pay the whole amount after I get a job. Next week, I hope.”

He goes to the entrance and carefully locks the door, then turns off the main light while I stand waiting.

“We won’t talk about money. Come.” He leads the way into a small cluttered back room, a sort of cloakroom. He motions to a rack where his overcoat is hanging. I hang mine next to his.

“I have a problem sometimes,” he says. He puts his arms around me and I see his sallow disappointed face clearly. His teeth are crooked. He is quite old, in his thirties.

“With your wife?”

A tiny pause, then he nods. So not only with his wife.

“I’ve always been faithful to my fiancé,” I tell him.

He understands what I mean. “We needn’t,” he says, “you know.”

“All right.”

He has his usual problem with me. Why did he expect it to be different? Finally he stops trying, sighs deeply and rearranges his clothing. I understand that he knows it is not my fault. We wrap our arms around each other, hold one another. We stand like this for a long time—I don’t know how long—I lose track of time. I am aware of us only as two broken anonymous people comforting each other. Perhaps being one half of an old married couple feels like this.

He gently lets go of me, and we stand again as separate people.

“Your fiancé,” he says, “he won’t marry you?”

“He broke off the engagement when I told him.”

“All right,” he says. “This is the arrangement. I will do what you ask. For your part, you will swear to tell no one it was me. If you do, it will destroy me. Do you understand that?”

I see fear in his eyes. “I understand. I would never tell.”

He decides he can trust me.

“And the next thing. If anything goes wrong—although I don’t believe anything will, nothing ever has—you must promise to call an ambulance. I’m serious.”

He is deadly serious, and I see that I am putting my future in his hands. I will trust him with my life.

*

I wait for him now. It will be done. While I wait, I think of peaches. It’s a long time since I’ve eaten a peach, eaten any fruit. Now in my grey time, I think salvation may lie in remembering the peaches of summer, the soft, sinful, succulent, self-indulgence of peaches, peaches that memorialise new mornings and the soft fuzzy-headed infant I will never see and will mourn. I am trying to remember the song of peaches, peaches singing their sonata through blossom, bud and fruit time. I am trying to remember the smell of peaches, the never-bottled, impossible to mimic, innocence aroma of the lust of peaches. I want to hold on to everything peaches have to say.

Simplicity

The air was heavy with antiseptic and anaesthetic. It caught in Donald's lungs, already irritable from his walk from the bus stop in the morning chill. He was afraid that the pungent smell would set off a fit of useless coughing and it would go on and on and leave him exhausted. He sat himself down on one of the orange and black moulded plastic chairs near the entrance of the Johannesburg General Hospital and forced himself to take small even breaths until his normal rhythm of breathing returned.

The place was beginning to fill up: he would have to move to the front of the waiting room to claim an early place in the queue.

It would be easier if Ella were still here, Ella who had always been his strength.

"You can do it," her remembered voice said. That was when he had been offered a promotion, more authority, responsibility for a section, a hundred men, and when confidence had left him. But he *had* managed before he was invalided out. The girls could be a help now, if they would. The walking and the bus journey took it out of him more and more. They were busy with their families, and he did not want to lay claim to their concern with his prognosis: "We can stabilize your condition, but we can't cure you." The medicines were not helping. He had given up smoking, but fumes and dust continued the damage. Would it be possible to get away from the city?

An urgent need to escape from his thoughts made him rise and concentrate on his careful way to the front row of chairs. It was not yet full: he could be seen this morning, perhaps even before the staff tea break.

There was something strange about the figure of the young man next to him in the row of seats. His small dark cropped head was turned away and the stocky tweed-jacketed body leaned out,

twisted at the waist so that its owner could look at the waiting patients ahead of him. Donald glanced down at heavy brogues, navy blue trousers, and a smooth white hand with tapering fingers that stood out against the blue knee of the trousers.

As though feeling the curious stare, the young man leaned back and turned to look at him. Startled by unexpectedly diminutive features, Donald exclaimed, "Oh, you're a woman! Why do you dress like a man?"

"I walk," she answered evenly. "I walk all over the place and at night. Nobody gives me any trouble dressed like this."

"Oh," he said, embarrassed by the grossness of his question. Wanting safer ground, he added gruffly, "Why are you here? You look healthy enough."

"I had 'flu, and they said I should come back next week. They don't like it if you don't keep appointments. Why are you here?"

The habit of keeping his condition to himself was strong. "A spot of chest trouble."

Pale blue eyes set in an unlined face continued to look steadily into his own. Anxious to avoid another question, he went on hurriedly, "I was thinking how good it would be to get away from the city, to live somewhere where there are trees and hills and perhaps a stream nearby." He gave a short laugh. "Back to nature, you know."

"Yes, I know. I walk to the green places. I've seen the sun come up at Zoo Lake."

Her answer took him seriously and affirmed his yearning. He began to play aloud with possibilities. "I've enough money saved for a second-hand caravan.* Terry, my son-in-law, could tow it out. He and I could spend a day or a weekend looking for the right place. It would need to be near enough to a town so I could go in and draw my pension and do the shopping."

*caravan: camper trailer

He fell silent, thinking of catching buses and of walking on a dirt road with passing cars churning up dust and his chest catching and heaving.

She remained still, with an air of timelessly waiting for him while he mourned his dream alone.

Then her voice recalled him, "I'm on a pension, too," and continued as if she had read his thoughts, "I could bring the pension money and groceries from the town." She went on looking him full in the face, and he searched for guile, sounding for a shifting of shadows in the depths of her clearwater eyes.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I could come with you. I used to work as a nurse-aid. You're not well. I could look after you."

He felt weak, dazed by the unreality, the impact of her statements. His revived vision of pure air in the grove and the splash of running stream on stones clashed with his distrust.

"What do you want with an old man like me!" The words were torn out of him. Faces turned in his direction, and in the corner of his eye white uniforms halted in their progress. She continued to look at him directly, impassively, her small square jaw tilted up to his face, eyes fixed patiently on his, seeming not to blink in their waiting.

More gently, he asked, "What do you want with me?"

She sighed. "My parents and my brother don't want me to come round when there are visitors, so I don't go at all, but I miss them. I want to belong to you."

It came to him. The pension, her not working, and her naivety: she was simple, that was it, not a girl up to mischief. An image of her in the caravan came to him. She was preparing a meal, going contentedly about her work, absorbed in the quiet run of her limited thoughts, leaving him in peace to his reveries. Would it matter when he wanted to talk that she would hear without comprehending everything? Would she bore him with prattle? She didn't seem the kind to prattle, but, anyway, maybe, maybe all that was a small price to pay for the comfort of another being

when the coughing took him at night and he struggled against drowning in his own fluid. But, what would people think? What would his daughters think?

Her uninflected voice broke in on him. "You will grow to love me."

"Yes," he answered, "I think so."

Outcasts

—March 1987

At her home in Johannesburg, Anna's daughter Helen sits across the coffee table. Helen looks strained; her eyes are swollen; she has been crying.

"Here's the invitation," she says. She leans forward and hands it over. Anna reads and is struck dumb. It's outrageous: her name is not on the invitation to her own daughter's wedding. Both of Gavin's parents' names are. A murderous heat rises from the center of her body. She won't go to the wedding; he's using it as another opportunity to strike at her, not caring if he injures their daughter too. Helen must have pleaded with him not to do this. How hard it is on her: try not to make it harder. The rage that threatens to overwhelm her simmers down.

Helen is watching her, waiting. Anna says mildly, "Thanks for the invitation, but I see that my name is missing. I assume I won't be in the same pew as your father."

Helen nods. "There's something else," she says. "About the reception . . ." She is unable to continue.

"I see," says Anna. "I guess at the reception your father's girlfriend Sally will be sitting in my place at the top table with him and Gavin's parents."

The girl nods. Sally also probably tried to dissuade him. She seems like a decent person.

"So, where will I sit?"

"At a table with the minister and other guests. I don't think you know them."

Anna imagines the scene: she, the mother of the bride, is looking up at the "table of honour." She sits with strangers, making polite conversation, hoping they won't ask who she is. Other guests are there, former mutual friends who have been

deliberately alienated from her; they know, of course, that she is Helen's mother. Rage surges up again. Humiliating. She could do this, but she won't.

"I'm sorry, Helen. I'll be there for you at the church, but I won't stay for the reception."

They look at each other. There are things they can't or won't say.

*

Anna buys a new dress, a dress fitting for the mother of a bride, a hat that flatters her, and a corsage. She will put her best face forward and get through the marriage service.

She sits some rows behind her former husband and Sally. Gavin's parents sit in the front row on the other side of the church. Anna waits for the long minutes to pass. She is being punished, and God knows what he has told Gavin's parents and her former friends. Anna stares at his familiar shoulders, short back-and-sides haircut, and stiff neck. She reads his mind, as she used to: he is highly conscious of her behind him and is gloating. The rage she has managed to suppress rises like a mushroom cloud. It envelops her. Suffocating, she recalls the gun that is always in her handbag for self-defense because of Johannesburg's high violent crime rate. She takes out the Ruby revolver and twirls the cylinder; it is loaded. She takes aim at the well-known head in front of her. She fires, blasting the pious air. A red blossom blooms on the back of his head. Blood, bone fragments and gray matter spatter on the guests and their finery in a wide circle around him. They should have asked for her side of the story. She replaces the gun in her bag. With the rest of the congregation she stands and then walks forward alone and peaceably to sign the register as the mother of the bride.

*

People stand in groups on the lawn. Anna waits on her own. She hopes to say good-bye to Helen soon, before the photographs are taken. Here she comes.

“Mum,” says Helen, “will you take Miriam, Dad’s maid, and her friend back to his house?”

“I will. And you, you have a wonderful life with Gavin. I love you. And love to Gavin.”

Of course, the maids wouldn’t be able to stay for the reception. This is apartheid, and they are the politically despised and deprived. The maids squeeze into the back of her two-door Beetle. If there had been just one of them, she would have asked her to sit in the passenger seat, but she senses that they’ll be more at ease together.

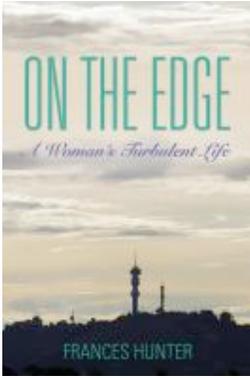
She breathes a sigh of relief: the ordeal is over. They drive in silence until Miriam asks, “You know the way, medem?”

“Yes, Miriam, I do,” says Anna. She lived in that house for years.

“How you know Helen, medem?”

The question is unexpected. Anna takes a deep breath before answering. “I’m Helen’s mother.” She holds back tears. She won’t break down now.

“Hawu, medem!” Waves of astonishment float from the back seat, followed by waves of fellow-feeling. Both of them surely are mothers and—sensing however hazily across the colour bar what this means—they send her their unspoken sympathy. For the rest of the drive no words pass between them. She allows herself to be wrapped in their care.



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