



## NOT THE ENGLISH MARGATE

Fiona Ritchie Walker

*She is trying to pull down the tray on the back of the seat when she breaks her nail.*

Fran had short nails when I first met her. She was working in a pizza parlour in Newcastle. I noticed her smile first. Wide, generous, fake. Everyone got the same smile whether they were good customers or not, whether they gave a tip or counted out the exact amount of money then left it on the table.

After a few evenings of studying her from a distance, I realised Fran's eyes told the truth, not her smile. Eavesdropping on some of the other tables, I heard the disdain in her voice when people asked if she was Australian, telling them she was from Margate, but not the

south of England one. The Margate that was hot and beautiful. The South African one.

I was a fake too. I took that information and swotted up. I got out a map and discovered where the hot Margate was, just down from Durban, on the Hibiscus coast. I learned about the best places to eat, the sardine run, that nearby St Michael's is the best beach for surfing, with even championships held there. That night I asked her which part of South Africa she came from. Her eyes shone as she told me, and when I asked her out at the end of her shift.

After that, nothing was fake between us. I wanted her with me all the time and knew she felt the same, so asked her to marry me. And she said yes. We went to Margate and got married at the little Methodist Church there, honeymooning in Cape Town, before we came back and settled into our new flat.

*I watch as she searches in her bag. She is frantic. The tears mean she can't see properly and I can't offer to help, because I know she wants to do this by herself.*

Fran insists that she keeps her old job. I tell her, you could get something better, more convenient hours, but she says no. She likes her work. Soon she is assistant manager and then manager. She blossoms with the responsibility. One day, when I get home from the office, she is waiting at the breakfast bar, beaming. She has won a regional sales competition. The prize is a long weekend in Prague. I book the time off. She arranges cover in the restaurant. We pack our case and collect our currency. And then comes the phone call to say that her father has died.

*She finds the nail clippers.*

‘I want to keep the house.’ It’s the day after the funeral. She is sitting on the swing seat in the porch, kicking herself away from the white fence every time she swings close to it. Her foot makes stabbing movements. Each time her face grimaces with the action.

‘Fine,’ I say. ‘We could come over here for holidays. Maybe we could rent it out to help pay for the upkeep.’

‘No.’ Her lips are two straight lines. ‘I want to move back.’

That night in bed we lie like sticks, not touching. She knows I cannot get a work permit easily and there’s no way I can keep my job and live in South Africa. Over dinner she told me she could use her teaching qualifications for the first time. She could earn enough for the two of us. But I’ve seen how much it costs to live here, and although things seem cheap there are all the hidden costs: the health insurance, the security response team to pay for looking after your home, the lack of a company car and the realisation that it’s not so easy to jump on a plane for the UK when you’re earning in South African rand.

‘Why move?’ I ask her. The fan is beating a steady rhythm above our heads. We are lying with the windows closed against the humid night, but still we are hot and wet.

‘We could have this beautiful house instead of our tiny flat,’ she says. ‘We could afford maids.’

‘I thought that was one of the reasons you left?’

‘That was so long ago. I was different. I wanted to do things on my own. South Africa’s changed now. I don’t need to rebel against the

old ways, like keeping a maid. In the Rainbow Nation you can give valuable employment to people, even in your home. It's part of the new economy.'

'And to pay for your maid and garden boy?'

'I could earn enough. You would find a job and get a permit. You know you would.'

There is a foot between us, yet heat radiates out from Fran's body. I wonder if I am doing the same to her. I hear something scuttle across the floor. Geckoes, probably, although this morning a neighbour told us he killed a green mamba. I am too hot to argue. I love my wife. 'OK,' I tell her.

*She clips off the ragged thumb nail.*

The first week was the funeral. The second week, we began clearing the house and this third week, we are making plans to move over here. One morning I go running on the beach. I run down the hill, through the shopping streets and past the children's pool. I run past the Wimpy and the safety flags for swimming. I jog slowly back up the hill. When I get to the house, Fran is talking to her cousin, Wendy, over coffee in the kitchen.

'All change for both of us then,' Wendy says. 'This house needs a lot of work done on it, but once you're finished it will be lovely. A real family home. Just right for when you have kids.'

I walk into the kitchen and kiss first Fran, then Wendy.

'Good run?' Fran pours me a coffee.

'Perfect.' I am rubbing my neck with a towel.

Wendy laughs. 'Good job you're here in winter. When you move

out here you won't be running at this time of day. The humidity, that's what makes people leave this place.'

She picks up Fran's hand. 'Your skin is beautiful. It's that English weather. And look at your nails.'

Fran laughs. 'They're not like this in England. My nails are never this long. It's all the washing up and doing the garden. We have an allotment, you know, grow our own vegetables.'

Wendy raises her eyebrows. 'No dishwasher? No maid? No-one to do the garden? And a job? My dear, no wonder you want to move to South Africa.'

*Next she clips the nail of her index finger. She pulls off the last of it, doesn't care about the blood.*

When we are in bed that night, Fran tells me about her cousin and her family moving to Australia.

'There are other people you know,' I tell her. I am trying not to move. My ankles have begun swelling in the heat. I don't think I'll risk running in the morning.

'I know some people, but not many. Not like the old days. And I keep thinking I'll see Dad round every corner.' I feel the mattress move as she stretches, then the rise as her body weight disappears. She walks to the window and opens it.

'Do you think that's wise?'

'Why not? There's a metal grille. And it's so hot.' She climbs back into bed and snuggles up beside me. We stay like that for only a couple of minutes, then Fran takes her sweating body to the cooler side of the bed.

*The air steward stops when she is checking seat belts. She watches Fran for a moment, then moves on.*

We are aiming to get our flat sold and everything sorted within six months. We fly back to Newcastle and Fran hands in her notice. We luxuriate in cool sheets. We make love without dripping and sticking to each other. Fran books another flight to Durban. This time she will be away for a month. I email her every day. I throw myself into work. I look for jobs that would allow me to work overseas. A friend says he may be able to help, although the pay isn't brilliant. I ask him to send me details.

The British summer is turning to a chilly autumn. I lie in our double bed and feel my feet grow cold. Fran emails that it is so hot and humid she has to lie down in the middle of the day. She tells me she is supervising the work in the garden. My nails are beautifully long again, she writes, unlike my poor hair — too much sun and split ends.

*Fran is in a world of her own.*

It is Wendy that rings me the next morning. Tells me that things are not as bad as they might have been. Fran is bruised and she has two stitches in her cheek, but this will heal. 'Did he... was she?' The question lies between us.

'No.'

Wendy starts to describe what was taken from the house, the way the grille had been sawn through and then left in place until dark. I am only half-listening. I am looking for the telephone number so I can book my flight.

*She stops for a moment and turns on the air vent above her head.  
The icy blast blows her fringe, propels a tear down her cheek.*

The grille has been repaired, but she doesn't want to sleep in that room. She has pulled the mattress to the small bedroom at the back that used to be a study. This is the room that she had when she was a girl. The overhead fan feels like a heater. My skin is prickling. I put my arm around Fran and she snuggles against me, although every movement makes a noise as our arms and shoulders stick, skin on skin.. She tells me of the man who broke into the house, how he lashed out at her, how she fought back. The police found his skin under her fingernails. They wanted to know if she could identify him again. She tells me this is what she is having nightmares about. Having to come face to face with the man again.

*Fran takes out a nail file and starts to saw at each fingernail in turn.*

'Is it possible for your blood to thin?'

We are having breakfast in the Waffle House overlooking the lagoon with its Japanese-style bridge.

'I'm not sure,' I say.

'I don't remember it being this hot,' Fran tells me. 'This beach, when I was at school, we'd come here in the holidays, in the middle of summer and play beach volleyball. We took the lilo round the lagoon. I don't remember it being this hot.'

I take her hand, her beautiful long fingers intertwining with mine, and see the ridged gold of our wedding rings. I offer a silent

prayer of thanks that her ring wasn't taken.

'Sometimes things aren't as we think. Remember when we went to visit my grandmother's house in the Lake District? That garden... I remember it seemed to go on for ever. My cousins and I could get lost down there for a whole day, exploring among the fruit trees, making the hollow holly tree our den. But you can see right to the bottom from the upstairs window, and there are less than a dozen trees, and always were. And I remember the summers there always being hot and sunny.'

'Not like the day we visited.' Fran is smiling now, but it's her fake smile, the one I've not seen for a long time. Her eyes are dull and I long to know what to do so that they will sparkle again. The waiter, Lucky, comes to clear our plates and refills our coffee mugs.

'I was thinking, maybe it's not such a good idea for us to move over here.' Fran stares into her coffee. 'Believe it or not, for all I complain about the weather in England, I've been missing the rain and those long, summer evenings. I'd forgotten how quickly it becomes dark here. And maybe, maybe teaching wouldn't be right for me.'

I wonder whether I should tell her about the job. 'It's up to you,' I say. 'You know I'd be happy living anywhere as long as I'm with you.'

'You old romantic.' Her smile is real now and so is her kiss.

*Soon a white dust lies over her trousers.*

We decide to rent out the house. A nice couple and we feel happy handing over the keys.

Wendy drops us off at the airport, makes us promise to visit her

in Australia. 'We will have a ball,' she promises.

Once we've checked in our luggage and are waiting for our flight, we wander round the shops, buy some magazines and sweets.

'That's our flight flashing now,' Fran says. Before we head for the departure gate I go to the toilet. It's only when I'm drying my hands that I register the high-pitch screaming and recognise who it is. When I run out, I see Fran next to a security guard who is holding a young man, his arms pinned to his back.

'I was only trying to help', he says. 'She dropped her passport.' He holds it up and hands it to the guard.

Fran drops into a seat, crying. She stares at her hands, then at the man's face. There is a red gouge on his cheek. I kneel down beside her.

'It's true,' she whispers. 'He was only trying to help. But I thought, for a moment, I thought it was....'

I explain to the security guard about the break-in and he nods sympathetically. 'Ach, these things leave a lasting impression. The man says he won't press charges, so I suggest you and your wife go and catch your plane.'

*She gives me a weak smile. 'Soon be home and away from all this awful heat. Tomorrow you can run without collapsing and I'll have coffee ready for when you get back.'*

This morning, before we set off for the airport, we drank coffee in the kitchen with the fan on full. We watched the men working in the garden, cutting back trees. One still had creamy blossoms on it, but the branches were stopping the garage door from opening. The knives cut easily through the paper bark and branch after branch stacked up

on the ground. Petals lay on the dirt. The tree looked undressed, its hollow stumps seem shocked. When I asked one of the workmen what kind it was, he told me, 'Frangipani.'

*The steward goes over the safety instructions. I hold Fran's hand and my finger rubs the hard edge of her thumb nail, so close to her skin. Even with my eyes closed, I can still see the tree, its sap dripping slowly to the ground.*

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