

'The Edge'

By Annie Holroyd

Just one more.

Just. One. More.

The words themselves are intoxicating; a lie from which you know nothing good can come, yet one which is so often whispered, either in defense to another's objections, or, more sinisterly, whispered to yourself. Why? No-one can hear you; no-one is paying attention to you; and deep down you know that there is no truth in what you say, so why lie to yourself? It can't be healthy to try and trick your own mind, but, I suppose, the real mystery is why talk to yourself at all. Of course, most people do, but it seems rather counterproductive when the aim of drinking excessively is usually to silence the ramblings of your own mind and reduce it to silent blurs. Why engage something that you are trying to drown?

Of course, none of this occurred to Frank; not right now anyway. If you'd caught him some morning, some other time, when his mind was clear, Frank Hallows was in fact an immensely knowledgeable and wise man. A teacher. A poet. A middle-aged man with sunken eyes and clammy skin. Frank was a good person, once adored by the children and parents alike at the little primary school on the outskirts of London where he had once taught, and likewise, he adored them. But like all happy things in Frank's life, that had come to an end some months ago when he had been forced to leave. Of course, he hoped they would still remember him from time to time, but even the strongest of bonds could break down with the right amount of distance. It had destroyed Frank, to put it simply, being forced to leave. They had told him maybe one day he could return, they had even hoped it, but in all truth, that would probably never happen. Not now, with what the doctors had told him. No, Frank was alone. He couldn't

help feeling a little rejected. What was his purpose? What was he good for now? Since he had left, he had wandered around searching for some meaning, some clarity, although what he wanted clarity on was not all that clear.

“Just one more,” Frank whispered, not to anyone else; although there were many people around him to hear, but to the part of him somewhere beneath the surface that still resided in him. He willed himself to listen, but perhaps tonight wasn’t his night to win. He reached across the bar counter and let his overbearing fingers rest upon a nearby beer-bottle. He clung to it like a baby to its mother, but it did not offer him comfort. As the cold crept through his fingers and travelled along his arm, he began to clench his teeth. Here was a man at odds; he knew what he was doing. He knew that what lay inside that bottle was no more his friend than the devil himself, but it offered a solace; a peace of sorts; something to numb the mind. That was what Frank needed more than anything else; to feel nothing.

There was a smashing sound. Frank jumped backwards and stumbled onto the floor. Dazed, he looked around him; the bottle, his bottle, he thought, lay in shattered pieces on the floor around him. There was no liquid, just broken glass. Frank touched his hand to his mouth and felt the cold oozing of beer dribbling down his chin; the last traces of his poison. As he pulled his hand away he noticed the blood, red and sticky, hot on his skin. It was seeping out of his fingers, out of his fist. A man tried to pull him to his feet but Frank shook himself free. He didn’t need help. He needed to just be, just for a minute, as he was.

Frank was in the bathroom. His hands were pressed, side-by side, against the cold, flat glass that rested above the sinks. The glass was dirty; smudged with alcohol and sweat and the lipstick stains of other people’s stories, but Frank didn’t notice. He was noting the position of his hands on the glass, the way they were spread out, strained

and menacing, over his own reflection. Curious, he thought. They were almost exactly over his neck; if he cupped his hands he could almost be strangling his own reflection...

He was brought back to himself with a jolt. His breathing was rapid and desperate, his head heavy. His body leaned against the grimy bathroom walls as though it was weak and exhausted; as though it could not support itself any longer. Frank coughed and brought his hands to his neck to feel his skin; there were no bruises, no swelling. It had just been his imagination. He felt like inside of his head was swimming, filled with nothing but air, yet he couldn't manage to hold it up. Its weight was devastating, crushing his neck, making his skin sink and his eyes droop.

“What’s wrong with me?”

The words echoed in the empty bathroom, bouncing off the walls and back to Frank.

“What’s wrong with me?”

Filling his ears, louder and louder, until it was all he could do to raise his hands to his head desperately, trying to make it stop. The noise became a wail, a scream almost, tearing apart his insides, piercing his head. Then, silence. Frank was on the floor, rigid and crinkled: a man, alone, waiting to be saved.

Buzzing. His pocket was buzzing. He pulled out his phone and read the name Mia aloud. Before he'd even said a word, Mia began shouting; “Where are you? Frank- so help me god if you're at the pub again-“

The phone hit the floor. Clutching at it with clumsy fingers, Frank managed to bring it back to his ear.

“Frank?! Frank!”

He coughed. “I can't talk right now.”

“When can you talk? I never see you anymore, you don’t call, and when I do you’re sure to be at that bloody pub! All hours of the day! What happened to you Frank? What happened to my brother?”

Frank’s vision was blurring slightly; everything was starting to get dimmer. Soon, he felt, he would be in darkness. As he listened to Mia’s sobs, he suddenly felt a twang of guilt, of sadness. For once, he had not had enough that his emotions had been blurred. He realized in that moment that things hadn’t been this clear in months. He felt that man, deep down, that he had once been. The one he had stifled and pushed down to the most hidden depths of himself and tried to suffocate. He took a long deep breath, and said, clearer than he thought his voice could be, “I’m sorry Mia. I’m sorry.” And put the phone down. It was going to be tonight.

He was on the roof. He didn’t know how he’d got there but it didn’t matter. It was where he had intended to end up. Slowly, carefully, he made his way to the edge of the building and peered over the edge. It was a long way down. First, he thought, he needed to get *them* off. He needed to feel like himself again, one last time, and not like an experiment, a subject, a number; a cancer patient with nothing to lose. He stripped off his shirt and uncovered a host of wires strapped to his body; tubes lined his arms, piercing his wrists, his veins, linking his body like a puppet’s strings. One by one, he began to tear them off. What use did he have for fluid lines and vital signs where he was going? When he was done, he shuffled his way further along, closer to the edge. He stood in the same place as he had stood countless times before, where he had willed himself, pushed himself, to make the jump. But unlike every other time, his mind did not begin to race and panic. It did not tell him to step back towards the safety of the door, or that he was being stupid and careless. For the first time in a long time, Frank’s mind was clear and simple. For the first time in a long time, Frank felt free. He breathed in the

busy London air, listened to the sirens and the cars and the people. London really was a beautiful place. He realized he was going to miss that. With a last glance at the building behind him, with its bright lights and stone walls, the very illusion of safety, he felt the metaphorical nod of approval. He was sure.

With a long, deep breath, Frank jumped.

For a few seconds, Frank felt as light as a bird, soaring through the cool night air, and then, as his fate began to approach him, and the darkness that had followed Frank for months vanished, as if it had never existed at all, he smiled, and reached out to greet his shadow with open arms. For now, Frank Hallows was free.