

I WAS BORN ON THE FINKE

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Sometimes, when I am ironing, or driving, or just sitting in the sun, I think of Edie, and I cry. I cry inside, because those of us who are now elderly have been brought up not to show emotion publicly. I cry with frustration and sorrow, because I know that I have let Edie down, and I feel heavy and helpless because it is now too late to say: "Tell us more about that, Edie."

I grieve that I did not write Edie's story while she was still around to tell it. But I am not accustomed to writing, and I did not realise, when I listened to Edie and marvelled, that unless I took some responsibility for writing about what she had done, it may soon be forgotten.

I can tell, though, how this quietly determined woman, so long ago, showed the strength of will to challenge successfully a bureaucratic decision of the worst kind - that is, the decision which resulted in small children being taken from their families, the parting of sisters and brothers, the leaving of mothers grieving and fathers confused.

I first met Edith Strangways on the platform at Marree Railway station. It was late, on a warm spring night and she was sitting on a flat car waiting for the train to come in from the South. At that time goods and passengers were transferred at Marree from the Port Augusta train into the old Ghan, which was already waiting at the platform to begin its long, rocking crawl up to the Alice. Most of the town population was down there, some to collect fresh supplies and consigned goods from the South, some to greet friends

* Joyce Fitzpatrick's story of Edith Strangways appeared in the *First Short Story Anthology* of the South Australian Women's Day Committee Inc. and is reproduced with permission.

and family who were on the train crew, and some of us for no particular reason. Probably we were there for the entertainment we got from watching the transferring passengers being so earnest and adventurous, and the fun of gawking at their intrepid-traveller gear.

Although quite elderly, Edie was at this time looking after one of her granddaughters who attended the local school. A series of exchange visits was being arranged and Teresa, the granddaughter, was determined to be part of it. Her teacher agreed that Teresa should go, but Edie wasn't so sure. You see, the arrangements were for families to go together, not just the children, and Teresa could see that if Edie wouldn't come her chances lessened considerably. As I was arranging the Adelaide part of the visit, Teresa saw me as an ally, and hurried me down to the flat car to introduce me to her grandmother. Then, with a grin and a wink, she left us.

I started to explain about the trip. I was earnest and sensible and persuasive, I thought. Edie sat and listened, drawing me on with her silence, until I became afraid that I may talk too much and ruin it all for Teresa. Overkill, they call it nowadays. So I waited for her response, then gently hinted and presented alternatives, but still Edie would not commit herself. She said she knew all the reasons for the visit, but she wasn't convinced; she had been to Adelaide and didn't think much of it.

There was quite a bit of moonlight down the end of the platform where we were sitting, away from the crowd and the lights, and I could see Edie's eyes glinting as she teased me, even taunting me a little. She sat then, as always, still and straight, not bending or giving, using words sparingly. The words she chose to use were often harsh and sharp but her eyes were soft, at times, and flicked humour at me. The train was late coming in, and even

after we had casually watched the bustle of transfer, heard the clanging and banging further up the platform, and the shouted instructions, and then bent our bodies forward to watch the Ghan waddle off along the moonlit stretch of rails to the North, Edie still played games with me.

It was several days before she told me that she and Teresa would be joining the group to come to Adelaide. During those days I longed for her to agree to come, but I knew that I must stay quiet and wait for her to speak first. There was an urgency in me that grew from a desire to get to know Edith Strangways better, to a need, and I was not too sure how to go about it.

We became firm friends, however, during the visit to Adelaide. It was apparent that Edie influenced the other people in the group. Her authority and air of knowledge were so sure that the young girls, the teenagers, who were so much more articulate than she, and who had acquired skills from the school that she had not, often were resentful. Yet they seemed to know better than to defy outright her counsel.

Later, she stayed with me in my home south of Adelaide. Edith loved the shrubs and flowers and the shade of the trees in our back yard, and she and my husband would sit and yarn for hours. She became more generous with her words and would talk as often as she listened. Tea kept them going. A fresh pot of tea at regular intervals, and the occasional plate of cake, kept me hovering in and out of the picture, like a sort of flowering quince, moving in the background. I could see Edie becoming as comfortable with my husband as she had become with me.

Then, gradually she told us about herself. She was born on the Finke, she said, but had moved often and lived most of her adult life further south. She was proud of having been born on

the Finke, and I can understand that when I picture the pale river bed, the stones and the sand shimmering in the sun, and the stretches of tall, graceful trees, and the lovely liveliness of the country after a good rain.

While she valued the fact of where she was born, Edie scorned the 'when'. "What's when!" she would say. "That doesn't matter." And we agreed with her. Although she must have been over eighty at the time her enjoyment of each day, her teasing wit and bright dignity all helped to make age irrelevant. Most of all, though, it was her conviction that each person, and each living thing, had its own unique importance, and her quiet insistence that we should all look for and respect the value of each other, that made Edith Strangways a woman of all times, and of all races.

She told me one day that she had been taken from her home when she was young and brought to Adelaide to work for a white family in a house high above the sea. There were wheat paddocks behind the house, and deep clefts in the land that ran down to the sea. She hated the cold winds and constant damp, and the separation from her people. She said that she always felt so ill that she knew she would die if she had to stay in this place.

One evening, when she had finished her work for the day, she packed her clothes and walked inland to a small railway siding. There she caught a train to Adelaide. She waited at the Adelaide Railway Station for a train that would take her to Marree. She did not know how long the wait had been, perhaps several days, but she remembered being pleased that she had enough money to pay for her ticket. She told us she didn't need to know how to read and write to do all this; she had needed to do it so badly that nothing would have stopped her. Reading and writing were not important, not in her determination to make her way back home.

With us, she recognised the land just north of Port Noarlunga and one of the old farmhouses, now surrounded by a suburb and, from the car, she showed us where she had made her way across the paddocks to where the railway line had once been. We could see her, all those years ago, a slim, tall girl, still very young, striding across the stubble as night fell, leaving the darkening sea behind her and only knowing that somewhere out there, ahead of her, was home.

Years later, she told us, when she had children of her own, she lived near Finnis Creek. One night, when we were talking about schools and children, she said that she believed schools were important but that children should be allowed to have both schools and family together - that one without the other was not good for a child. Oh, Edie, I thought, you and me and Montessori - and I asked her to tell me more.

The Government men kept coming, she said, to take the children so they could go to school "too far away". The pernicious but legal practice of separating Aboriginal children from their parents for "the good of the children", and sending them away to institutions and hostels, was customary at the time.

Sometimes the children were too young ever to find their way back to their own people. Sometimes they were moved from one place to another and their parents lost track of them. Edie told us that this was "too terrible", and that she took her children right up the creek and hid them each time the men came. Soon the other mothers were doing the same and the Government men would have to go away, because no one would tell them where the children were.

Despite her determination to keep her children with her, Edie had come to believe that they should learn to read and write; that traditional learning would not be enough for them in their

future; that schools would be able to teach them many things that would help them to do the things they wanted to when the time came for them to leave their own people. This was a dilemma for her, but with characteristic resourcefulness, Edie set about finding a solution.

The next time the Government men came, Edie met them under the trees near the creek. Other mothers were there to support her, and some of the men as well. But Edie was on her own when she walked up to the Government men and told them she would continue to hide the children, or even move further away because she believed the children needed to be with their families while they learnt new things. "I told them that we had many children but that they needed only one school. It would be safer to bring one school to the children. It would be harder to find the children and take them all away to a school."

The men went away, and the next time they came they said that a school would be built. It was built, under the trees near the creek, and twenty-seven children were not forcibly removed from their families to go to school 'for their own good'.

"How did you feel, Edie," my husband asked, "when you walked up to the Government men and told them to bring the school to the children?" Edie indicated that she nearly died. All these years later, her face tightened, her hands clenched and her eyes closed as she recalled the agony of effort it had cost her.

Before Edie went back to Marree that time, my mother, who was then in her eighties, invited Edie over for afternoon tea. Edie was keen to go. I knew that, because instead of prevaricating, or teasing me, she casually nodded "yes". I sat back in my mother's lounge room and watched these two tall, white-haired women, one from a background of unyielding Anglo-Danish traditions and the

other from the Finke and the Finnis, with a background similarly stern and demanding, and marvelled at the way they somehow matched each other.

They talked surprisingly easily about the change of government, the beauty of the summer garden, and why they both preferred plain cake for afternoon tea. Edie didn't tease or glint, and my mother didn't fault or criticize. It was as if they each recognised and respected the indomitability that they both possessed.

I saw Edie several times after that, at Marree, but she was more reluctant to talk about her past and preferred to question me about my family. She was fond of my red-haired student son, and would get out the coloured photograph of them having morning tea at a table on the back lawn at our place. She would laugh at the colour contrasts - her darkness and Richard's flaming red hair against the white drift of snowballs on the guelder rose, and point out the black and white patchwork of the old dog lying under the table on the bright green lawn. She was concerned about Richard's progress at university and whether he was working hard enough, and about my mother's health. She always asked about the garden, and said she wanted to stay with us again, but "not just yet".

Then one of her relatives sent word that Edie had moved down to Port Augusta, and that Teresa was attending high school. Also that Edie wanted me to go up to visit her. I did, but Edie was not having a good day. We talked only a little, and held hands while she dozed, and I realised how very tired she was. Not long after that I heard Edie had died in the Port Augusta hospital.

These fragments that I have written are so little, such sparse accounts of episodes in the life of a woman with unique wisdom, understanding and courage.

Edith Strangways had challenged a harsh bureaucracy and won that challenge. What strengths did she use?

Illiterate in the English language and not very articulate, she still was able to defy the Government and save her own, and other children, from the cruelty of separation.

I am sad that I cannot write Edie's story adequately.

She moved so positively between different cultures and traditions, being true to herself always. She influenced and affected the lives of others.

How much more there must be to tell.

