



TLC SHOWCASE

Frances Beaumont

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Introduction to *A Life Without Hands*

A Life Without Hands - John Oliver and Me has been a long time coming. It began a year after John Oliver died in 2014. The first version of the book was John's biography, and it took me three years to write. My writing group said, "The best bits are where you are interacting with John. It needs more of you in the book!" I had never considered writing a memoir. I finally agreed, though I guessed it would be exposing and difficult to write. The first version was not a waste of time. It gave me practice, and I found my unique writing 'voice' only when I started on my memoir. It took six years to merge the biography and my memoir into one.

Thinking I'd finished, I sent the first fifty pages to Tony Grissoni, the director and screenwriter, for his opinion. I first met Tony when I was letting a room, and he needed a quiet place to write for a week. We talked over breakfast every day and became friends.

Tony directed me to The Literary Consultancy, saying, "I send all my professional writers there for a final check."

I trusted Tony's advice and submitted my 83,000-word manuscript. The service was friendly and efficient. I quickly received a detailed and thoughtful twelve-page 'crit' written by Frankie Bailey. She was encouraging and practical, suggesting rewriting some chapters in the present tense so that, as she put it, 'the reader will be there with you, on your shoulder, feeling what you feel.' This was just the advice I needed.

I am so grateful to Tony Grissoni for directing me to The Literary Consultancy, and to The Literary Consultancy for their skills and encouragement on my writing journey.

Getting *A Life Without Hands* published has been one of the best times of my life.

Extract from *A Life Without Hands*

Chapter 9: MEETING

If every day is like eating cake with unknown layers, the day I met John Oliver had such a surprising and unexpected flavour that the memory of it has stayed with me all my life.

It is a sunny Sunday. I am twenty-four years old and have recently returned from a year of Voluntary Service Overseas in the former Belgian Congo. It was a life-changing year, and I am missing Africa. I feel ready for a new adventure.

Andy, my brother, who is twenty-three, and I have spent the morning scraping the peeling grey paint off the hull of our Motor Fishing Vessel. We pooled the inheritance from our grandfather to buy it, and plan to live aboard and eventually travel. I love the idea of being rocked peacefully to sleep at night with water lapping on the hull, then waking in the morning to a great expanse of sea and sky.

That afternoon, one of Andy's mates says, "Fancy a trip?" and takes us downstream on his little cruiser towards the ancient arches of Rochester Bridge. I'm soaking up the sun on the foredeck when a dark tug called *Hobbit* races towards us.

Andy calls out to the skipper, "Hello mate! How are you?"

"I'm fine," he answers from the wheelhouse. Then, after a pause, he adds, "All I need is the love of a good woman!" His voice is as rich and clear as a Shakespearean actor's. We laugh and rock in his wake as he passes by.

I am intrigued.

"Who was that!" I ask Andy.

"Oh, that was Joliver."

Andy lives on a wooden barge called *Violet* in Borstal Marina. During high Spring tides, water soaks through the hull into the carpets. Andy is a student at Medway College and does not mind a bit of damp. He enjoys living with this bohemian collection of people in this hotchpotch of boats. It is cheap and friendly; people help each other. In

the evening, we go to his local pub, the Canopus, which is crowded with students and river people.

Andy says, "Look, there's Joliver!" pointing to a slim man in the middle of a group. I recognise his voice, and he is telling a joke: 'A dog was killed in a car crash and went to heaven,' he says, then pauses to look at his attentive audience, then continues, 'The dog waited patiently at the pearly gates for St Peter to let him in. When St Peter arrived, he took one look at the dog and said, 'You can't come in here like that! You haven't got a tail!' The dog explained he had lost his tail in the accident, but St Peter said, 'Go back down to earth. Find your tail, and then we'll see.' So, the dog returned to the crash site and searched high and low but couldn't find his tail. There was a pub across the road from there, so he went in, thinking someone might have found it. Standing up on his hind legs at the bar, he says,' Excuse me, landlord, can you help me? I'm looking for my tail, and I can't get into heaven without it.' The landlord scratches his head, then replies, 'I'm sorry mate, I'd like to help, but we do not retail spirits here!'

The room erupts in laughter as Joliver calmly carries on rolling a cigarette under the table with his toes. Only then do I realise, with a shock, he has no hands! His sleeves come down to about elbow level but are empty. Joliver quickly notices us on the edge of the group, and his eyes twinkle as he smiles at me and says to Andy, "Who is this then?" He slides along the bench and, with a flick of his sleeve, invites me to sit beside him. He has a strong face with a high forehead, and sandy-coloured hair and beard. His eyes are an amazing golden colour, and I realise they are gazing into mine.

"And what do you do?" he asks.

"I'm an occupational Therapist." I begin.

"Oh, I know," he says, "You're the ladies who keep men occupied in bed !"

We laugh at this old joke, and I watch, fascinated, as he delicately lifts the cigarette from its Rizla machine, licks the cigarette paper, then takes a box of matches and delicately removes a single match with his toes, before lighting up.

The fact that he has no hands does not shock me as much as it might do to some people. I've worked with patients who have limbs missing, mostly through accidents. I understand the intelligence, ingenuity and perseverance needed to become this self-confident and independent. Some people, seeing him, might expect him to be severely disabled, but they would be wrong.

"What do you do for a living?" I ask.

“Oh, all sorts,” he replies. “I’m the ferryman for Rochester Cruising Club and do towing work with my tug. Whatever I can get.”

We talk and laugh all evening. I’m not aware of anything else around us. When it’s time for me to go, Joliver says, “If you need anything, I’m moored off Rochester City Pier. Give me a shout, anytime.”

As I drive home, I keep thinking about this extraordinary man. His ‘dog without a tail’ joke was almost a parable about ‘difference’ and its acceptance, or rejection. And what did he say when we met on the river? ‘All I need is the love of a good woman!’

Maybe it was just a joke, but I could not help wondering at the truth behind it, and who that woman might be.

About the Writer

Frances Rowley Beaumont was born in London during the war but lived mainly in the countryside as a child. The eldest of four children, she went to Bromley High School and, despite wanting to be an artist, chose Occupational Therapy as a profession, qualifying from Botleys Park in 1964. She experienced a memorable year in the ex-Belgian Congo (DRC) working in a Rehabilitation Centre in Kinshasa, after President Lumumba's tragic assassination. Her love of art drew her to qualify as an Art and English teacher in Brighton in 1970. She was Head of the Art department for two years at St Angela's Providence Secondary School in London before returning to Occupational Therapy as a career. After working in the NHS and Social Services, Frances became an independent Occupational Therapist offering medico-legal witness reports and creating Dyspraxia UK, a service for adults with dyspraxia.



www.dyspraxiauk.com

Frances has written poetry all her life. In her forties, she discovered the joys of short story writing. At the age of seventy, when her dear friend John Oliver died, she began researching and writing his life story, and then her own memoir.

She has two children and two grandchildren and lives in Faversham, Kent, UK, getting around on a bright red electric tricycle. Frances enjoys writing, gardening, wildlife, art and friendships.

A Life Without Hands can be ordered as a paperback or e-book* from my website www.francesbeaumont.co.uk or <http://Books.by/frbeaumont> It is also available on Amazon and from Barnes and Noble bookstores.