

The Wall Flower

JOAN BARIL

Une jeune artiste qui a fait carrière comme photographe, peintre et poète se prend à faire tapisserie au mariage de sa sœur. Trop timide pour danser seule ou avec des copines, elle quitte la fête et se rappelle un copain d'université avec lequel elle a déjà cohabité parce que toutes les filles le faisaient.

The band starts and the bride and groom swing on to the floor. Colleen is sitting beside her Aunt Joyce at the family table, her hands clutched tightly under her evening bag. She'd rather be anywhere else, anywhere in the world, but you can't skip out on your sister's wedding.

Or can you?

At the head table, the best man bows out the maid of honour. The ushers, fulfilling their roles, partner the other bridesmaids. The six young women wear sleeveless green silk with trailing white ribbons. A swirling forest waltzes to, "You Light up My Life." The blond bride, green piping on white satin, glows in the centre.

Typical Dorion staging, thinks Colleen. Her sister's voluminous 1980s gown matches her passion for retro music.

She sees Sam Fellows, the groom's cousin, walk over to the far wall where her brother Guy is talking to three or four other men. They're colonizing a wall, she thinks, just like high school. A black and white male phalanx stands in front of the bar, facing the dancers. She knows most of them, went to school with many of them, is related to a few, but she knows none of them will ask her to dance. They never do.

Her mother and her new stepfather stand up for "Chantilly Lace."

"Your flowers are wonderful, Colleen," her mother says. "Unbelievable." Her stepfather, Max, nods in agreement.

They jive into the crowd.

Aunt Joyce speaks in her ear. "The way you got itty-bitty rose buds twining around the cake. Magic! What's the variety?"

"A miniature," Colleen tells her. "A polyanthus called 'The Fairy.' Very floriferous,"

"Just a minute. I'm going to write that down." Aunt Joyce scrambles in her evening bag for a miniature note book and pen. But before she can open the tiny book, Mr. Fellows, the groom's father, approaches. He holds out his hand to Aunt Joyce who pulls herself up, flushing with pleasure. Even when you're seventy-five, it seems, you still love to dance.

She's now alone at the table. The floor is crowded, mainly with married couples. A waiter comes by with champagne and she takes a glass for something to do. As she watches the dancers, tapping her toe to "Pretty Woman," she keeps her eyes away from the groom who seems to be dancing with each bridesmaid in turn. Alex Fellows. Too good looking. Too nice. Ah, she thinks, lucky Dorion. Lucky Dorion.

She stands. The familiar feeling of failure engulfs her and she has to get out. Like wallflowers everywhere, she'll go to the restroom. Her Uncle Leon waves her over, takes her hand and praises her table arrangements: posies of sweet William and baby's breath. If he were not crippled with arthritis, she thinks, she'd ask him to dance.

In the corridor, she stops. Other unattached women will have collected in the restroom by now, putting on makeup, chatting and wasting time before going back to dance with each other. As the evening progresses, they will start on the shooters and some will get drunk.

The coat room is on Colleen's right. Her shawl's in there and also her cloth bag with her secateurs, her packets of flower preservative and the low-heeled pumps she wore when she came an hour early for a final flower tweak. She goes in, slips the high-heeled torturers off and the pumps on. Flinging the shawl around her shoulders, she heads for the front door but stops again. The smokers will be clustered outside. She slips to the far end of the hall into the kitchen. Here, before the reception started, she soaked the bouquets, snipped and clipped, tweezed and wired.

the night. They must have been the last hippies in Thunder Bay, she thinks. What would it be like to live with a large group of friends, people filling the house with talk, the music always on? No shortage of dance partners there. Shared dinners, she thinks, and lots of laughter. She stares at the former hippie house, a brick three storey, now dark with blinds drawn. The truth stares back. If she'd lived there, she'd have been miserable.

Genes, DNA, one's early life, whatever. One's fate. It designs your inner being, sends you out and you follow

It's ridiculous to be so sensitive at thirty years of age. It's ridiculous to be ashamed of being a wall flower. To be defined by male approval. She'd always been a wall flower, even in high school. Why can't she just sit, tap the toe, enjoy the music? Why not dance with her girlfriends; why wait for a male?

She crosses the shadowy space to take the emergency exit.

Outside, at the back of the building, a single bulb lights the parking lot and the dumpster by the brick wall. The music thumps through. "Mama Mia." She weaves among the cars to the sidewalk. She's now an escapee. But not for long. If she stays away more than thirty minutes, her family will notice, start asking everyone, whispering with each other. "Have you seen, Colleen?" She cringes to think of it.

The last of a July sun splotches the asphalt, its warmth lifting out the pavement smells, the garden smells from behind hedges and fences, the food smells from narrow houses just putting on their evening lights. A faint breeze waltzes by moving her silk skirt around her ankles. In the vanishing light, her dress glows a peachy apricot, her favourite colour, the shade of certain martagon lilies. She slip-steps, swinging her body, making the silk glimmer. Each front yard holds a puddle of shadow and some sort of flowers. Happily alone now, light footed, she dances along the sidewalk, mouthing, "Ob La Di, Ob La Da, Life Goes On," glimpsing shasta daisies, a row of cosmos, bleeding heart, a dark line of monk's hood.

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She turns at Gratton Street, slows to walk up the hill. The street where she was born. The old narrow insul-brick house hides behind a long glass veranda. According to her mother, in 1978, a gang of hippies lived next door coming and going at all hours and playing the Moody Blues half

its path, no matter how the world tempts you otherwise.

Colleen's father died when her sister Dorion was four, her brother Guy a baby. She was six, old enough to have vague memories of his tobacco smell, his prickly unshaven face. When he came home from the bush, he let her rub his whiskers before he shaved them off. But she has no memory of the day his prospecting buddy arrived on the porch and her mother fell screaming at the man's feet. Yet she was present, she'd been told later by Aunt Joyce. Luckily, her guardian angel also incised the funeral from her brain, leaving behind some blurry shadows, a few faces and voices, the smell of the carnations, the texture of their leaves.

Now, when her relatives mention her father, they always say the same thing: *he missed the big news*. But she remembers it very well. January 9, 1995, a sloppy day of winter thaw. She was seventeen and in Grade Thirteen. After school, she sprinted home because a split along the sole of her Wal-Mart boots was sucking in water and she wanted to get to home before her toes froze. She'd not told her mother about the leaking boot. She dreaded the look on her mother's face, the brief sweep of despair before the smiling gloss took over. "Don't worry, Darling One, we'll manage somehow." The lilt in the words always made her wince inwardly.

She rushed up to the bedroom to change her soaking socks. Dorion sat at the tiny dressing table painting her nails black to match her heavy black eye liner, her black spiked hair, her black clothes and black lipstick all contrasting with the multiple studs winking in her nose, ears, and eyebrows.

A shout from downstairs. "Colleen!" Her mother home

so early? "Dorion, come down now! Guy where are you?" She heard the basement door open as her mother shouted down the backstairs to her brother's bedroom.

They gathered at the kitchen counter in shock. Steaks? Their mother had brought home two large T-bones for dinner and was now cutting them to fit the two battered fry pans. The steaks were marbled with veins of pale yellow fat and had a distinctive smell, sweeter than hamburger or stew meat.

"Where did you get them?" Colleen whispered.

"Maltese's Meats," her mother said gaily. "Steak is nothing. Get ready for the news, kiddos. The family train has jumped its rusty track and we're sailing the super highway." She circled the knife above her head, doing a little jig. In the other hand, she held an inch-thick slab which she dropped into the smoking grease. "I'm quitting my job at the radio station at the end of the month."

Colleen tried to speak, but couldn't. Her mother had worked in the office of CKYY as long as she could remember. A big squeeze of worry pressed her stomach.

"I've signed up for an evening real estate course." Her mother was pulling out several containers of salad from a grocery bag, ignoring the looks exchanged among her children. "You kids probably don't remember but Dad left me his mining claim in Gracie Township. You can't get there, except by bush plane. But today, I learned the province is building a road to a palladium mine the next township north. I saw the map. Hot news at the station. The road will swing right by our lakes and I'm going to divide the land into cottage lots and sell them all—rocks, trees, beach, swamp, the bleeding lot." She set a slab of brownies and a cheese cake in the middle of the table. "The market's on fire. Everyone wants a summer cottage and now they'll get one. A dream cottage less than ten miles from the city."

"You're going to sell my lake?" Colleen's sister wailed. Dorion Lake was the largest of the four with islands and long beaches. Her lake, Colleen Lake, sported a marsh at one end, or so she'd been told by Uncle Leon. She was sure the swamp would be rife with wild orchids. She'd dreamed of flying in one day after she started working and made some money. She'd camp there, canoe the lake and catalogue the plants. Guy Lake was rocky with a spectacular cliff gracing the far end. The lakes created a rough necklace of three, with her mother's lake, Kate Lake, behind the others. "The most beautiful," her late father supposedly had said, "and so I named it after my wife."

"It's not *your* lake, Dorion, dear," her mother said. "The lakes are mine. But, I'm going to set up trusts for you kids, splitting the money into four parts. After supper, I want each of you to write me a list of the five things you need right away. I went to the Royal Bank this afternoon and

asked for a ten-thousand dollar loan." Colleen gasped at the others who both gasp back at her like beached whales. "With those lakes as collateral," her mother went on, "it's a snap to be approved. I'll probably get the money tomorrow." She threw some cutlery in a heap in the centre of the table. "Nosh on, you lucky rich kids," she said.

Colleen ate the steak and wrote her list at the same time. She could not touch the salad or dessert. She didn't want to think about the bank loan or her mom leaving her job. She wrote:

1. Don't sell the marsh on my lake. There might be orchids.
2. Snow boots
3. A winter jacket
4. A subscription to "Fine Gardening."
5. A dress for the Valentine's dance.

She had an idea if she had the right clothes, then, for once, she'd enjoy the dance. A hard lesson. The dress did not deliver.

Dorion tore up several lists. A week later she handed hers in.

An Aljean kilt in Hunting Fraser tartan and short black velvet jacket.

Abercrombie and Fitch clothes

A cashmere pant suit—Ralph Lauren with Coach bag and shoes to match.

Hairdresser's for a cut and colour—white blond

Tommy Hilfinger casuals with leather boots.

At fifteen years of age, Dorion morphed overnight from a Goth to a Preppie.

Twelve-year-old Guy had trouble with his list. It contained two items.

Downhill skis.

Save so I can go to medical school.

Now, Doctor Guy Gathercole is off to Kosovo with the Red Cross at the end of the month. Before her wedding, Dorion moved her boutique to the Internet. And Colleen has a garden, a ten-acre paradise on land she bought from Uncle Leon. She designed a small house jewelled with windows. She makes her living as a hybrid: one who can photograph, paint, sketch and write about flowers. Slowly, she too is morphing. She's becoming an expert, seen in magazines and on TV. She's in demand.

But not at a dance.

Once, a year ago, when Dorion dropped by to get flowers for her shop, she'd asked why. Her sister grimaced in embarrassment. "Guys are like weeds; they're everywhere," she said. "You're not half bad looking, Colleen. Someone will drift by one of these days. But your problem is you're too insular. You like things the way they are."

Colleen almost said, "I don't want to be insular. I want to be loved. I want to love. I want to get married and have children, like normal people. Like you." But she felt her throat seize up. Each sentence seemed shadowed as if a parade of perverse imps lurked behind them, refuting them. She'd bent to clip fulva lilies and false spirea, filling two silver bowls, her hands shaking in confusion.

Now, she walks back down the Gratton Street hill to still more music from *Mama Mia*. "Waterloo." She can hear people singing along. She had a few boyfriends in university. She lived with Bruce Bonnycastle her entire final year. He was a great dancer but he was too big for the little apartment. He was always there: talking to her, including her, making plans, asking her opinion, trying to make her come up for air, to be present. She could not think, she could not read, she could not sketch or dream or design in her head. Her brain closed down. For two weeks that spring, she twisted in shame until she understood the extent of the waste, the travesty of the relationship. She was living with him because that's what women did. Women had boyfriends. They moved in with the guy. They were together forever. The thought gave her the horrors and so did the shame at her dishonesty to herself but especially her dishonesty to him.

She broke the news to him after the graduation dance.

Back inside, she slips on her heels, repairs her hair and lipstick. The dance floor is crowded. The single women are jiving up a storm. "Take a Chance on Me," bellow the guests. The same men stand and watch. Why don't they dance with each other, she thinks, get out on the floor and have some fun? It's ludicrous, pitiful, laughable. Just as idiotic as she is. She walks over to her brother Guy on his wall.

"I'd like to dance with you before you go away," she says ignoring his surprise. "Will you do me the favour?" They float out to "Unchained Melody." Guy dances like he skies or plays hockey, with such grace he makes it look easy. Her apricot silk flares around her legs. Her feet in the expensive heels move like delicate leaves caught by the wind. The single women don't dance to the slow music. Chatting and laughing, they head for the tables or the bar. The bride and groom are nowhere around. She hopes she's missed the bouquet toss.

"I caught the garter," Guy says in her ear. "I'm taking it to Kosovo."

"I'll miss you," she says. "I hope the garter brings you a wonderful wife." He laughs. The band segues, speeds into "Dancing Queen." Her mother waves during a complicated step. Colleen decides that later she'll ask her new step-father for a dance.

"Do you want a drink?" Guy says.

"No, I'm going to dance with Posie and the other gals.

Then I'll come over and join you at your wall."

Later, at home in bed, watching the moon top up the garden, she remembers she almost said, *with the other wallflowers*. She's glad she didn't say it. Her body still feels energized but her mind is melting into sleep, forsaking her thoughts about men, about women, about herself.

She thinks about her brother off to Kosovo, the bride's garter tucked into his bag. And she has a new brother-in-law, the handsome Alex. But he's more than a single person, she realizes. Alex's entire family is now linked to hers, tendrils emerging and merging, just as, a few years ago, the numerous kin of her new step-father were slowly grafted on.

Sprawling vines of connections.

She turns over into a happy thought. Her Aunt Joyce is coming to tea tomorrow. She'll pick a special bouquet for the tea table.

The dark yellow lilies called *Fata Morgana* are just moving into bloom.

Joan Baril lives in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

A. MARY MURPHY

words keep bursting out of books

words keep bursting out of books
birds startled into flight
butterflies clouding home from winter
keep the lids of all these books
closed to stop the words from getting out
like all flighted things they know secrets
the elaborate choreography of journey
they settle with their tissue-paper wings
their talons in my heart

A. Mary Murphy's poetry appears earlier in this volume.