

# Walls

London, England  
1892

It has all become too much.

Truly, this time it has. I simply cannot bear this any longer, so many rules, such a need to control. It is all overflowing inside of my head, and I must get it out somehow, so I wait until the hall outside my room is silent and steal quietly down it to lock myself in the bathroom.

It is, of course, a grand room, matching the rest of the house, the rest of the world. It is large and impressive, everything inside of it elegant but uncomfortable, once again like the rest of my world. The bath is hard, cold porcelain, a lake of a thing, large enough that a maid can enter to assist her mistress if needed. The cabinet along the back wall is a work of art in itself, elegantly carved with gold handles, and brimming with the most potent of toiletries. Even the walls shimmer, decorated with delicate, controlled touches of paint.

It is none of these things that I come for. I have come solely for two things: the window and the mirror.

I cross the room, seeking the mirror first. It is hung, elegantly if precariously, immediately above the ceramic washing-basin, resplendent in its gold frame. Its surface is polished to a glossy sheen. I force myself to look into it, to really see myself for the first time.

At the moment I am a bit of a mess – red-gold hair escaping the pins that so carefully held it together in an explosion of colour; blue eyes bright and rimmed red from my efforts not to cry; cream-coloured gown cinched tight, tight around my waist, hiding my corset. I am not ugly, perhaps, but not so beautiful either. I am certain that Mistress Moor would not consider me the type of woman a man would want for his wife.

But do I really want to be that type of woman? Rules, thousands of rules that have been force-fed to me all my life, chase each other around my head like frenzied dogs. *Eyes down, demure, don't make eye contact or her will think you brazen; corset tight or her will think you less than delicate; don't speak unless spoken to or he will think you impertinent; laugh quietly if at all or he will think you vulgar; go nowhere unaccompanied or God knows what he will think; and for heaven's sake, don't tell him anything about yourself!*

I have grown sick of all these rules, of having my every move governed by the eternal question: will I be able to find a husband? I want to make my own way. I want to see the world. I want to *live*.

My eyes blur with tears again, and I grip the basin's porcelain edge tightly, needing an outlet, needing to put my emotion somewhere besides my body. I blink the tears away even though no one is watching. I must not cry, if only so that I do not spoil my view.

In one swift, frustrated movement, I tear myself away from the mirror and cross to the window. I have always loved with view – huge, sweeping gardens embroidered with hedges and rainbow flowers, seeming so much less confined from above; fountains pouring out their water endlessly, only a sparkle and the faintest of noises from up here.

Form the window, I feel empowered, as though I, a woman, really could conceivably have some authority of my own.

It is a large window, almost as tall as me, gilded with ornate golden designs and made of Parisian glass. It opens simply, with just the lift of a latch, so that heat and odour can escape into the air when needed – most useful in the summer.

I reach for the latch, but pause when I hear a sharp rap on the door. “Hello?” I recognize the gruff voice of my maid, Eleanor. “Anyone in here? I’ve been waiting for this door to open for a good quarter hour!”

I hear the doorknob jiggle as she tries it. I smile to myself – she won’t get in, not while I have the key.

Ellie mutters a curse. “Maddening thing. The lock’s got stuck again, you see if it hasn’t. Now I’m going to have to fetch Mistress Moore, but no one cares for the trouble of a poor old maid, now, do they?”

I breathe a quiet sigh of relief as her footsteps fade down the hall. I do not care to be discovered by my short-tempered servant, especially not now – but she has gone to fetch the headmistress, to break open the lock. I don’t have much time.

Hurrying now, I reach down and undo both of the window latches, and it swings open like a pair of French doors. My heart beating fast in either fear or excitement – it is impossible to tell – I lean my head out of the window and take in a huge breath of fresh, cool, night air.

It is glorious, like being born again. I have never in my life, been given the chance to breathe outside air at night. Confined to my finishing school like a dog in a cage, I have always been forced to stay indoors after dark, and indeed usually during the day, breathing only stuffy manor air and never tasting the sweet breath of freedom.

But I have tasted it now. Oh, I have – and I know that I can never go back. I can never go back to a life of rules and confinement, of summer days spent learning French verbs, of winter nights sitting huddled by the fire against a cold I scarcely feel. Now that I know what it is like to taste freedom, I will never settle for anything less.

They are coming for me. I know they are. The headmistress probably already knows I am here – she’s a shrewd woman, Mistress Moore. If they catch me, they will try to force me back into their little world, a world of invisible walls more impenetrable than stone.

I wonder suddenly whether it is for protection that they make these rules – or for the control of something that even men fear.

I can hear footsteps in the hallway now, and the quiet, serious, controlled voices of my servant and headmistress, drawing closer every second. I know what I must do now – perhaps I knew all along. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I know the truth, know what I want. I push the windows out a little further, widening the opening into the outside world, and step forward. Where another would feel fear, perhaps, in my own heart there is only a fierce, wild hope.

I take one last breath of night air. With trembling fingers, I loosen the straps of my dress in a final act of defiance. I gaze at the spectacular gardens one last time, trying to memorize what power feels like.

And then I jump.

I suppose you’d like to know what happened to me. I’m not really sure myself, and anyway it’s none of your business.

But I'll tell. I'll tell all I can.  
Perhaps I crashed to the ground like a sinking stone and broke every bone in my body.  
Perhaps I am shattered, broken, little more than a toy someone has dropped. Perhaps I lie  
there in the gathering twilight, pale as marble, cold as stone, waiting for the morning,  
when some unfortunate soul will stumble upon me.

Perhaps they will hold a funeral, where everyone cries but no one is sad. Perhaps  
they will bury me in the cold ground in a wood box and forget me, leaving my bones to  
crumble to dust and be blown away with the rest of the past.

Or perhaps I landed on both feet, hit the ground hard but steadied myself and  
began to run. Perhaps I ran for the trees, letting that precious night wind tear at my lungs  
and grew wild like a mountain rose, the property of myself alone, a survivor of the siege  
they lay on a woman's freedom.

Perhaps I live, alone and unafraid, playing by my own rules and laughing at the  
world. Perhaps I have lost my name, my memories, my reasoning, everything. Perhaps I  
love this new life more than anything I have ever known.

And perhaps I am still falling.