

## How to Become a Wallflower

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Early morning, an orderly kitchen, and a sprite of sunshine glittering from mote to mote. The woman, lowering her teacup and raising her hand to the window, finds that she can see right through it to the garden beyond. She rolls up a sleeve, noting with detached curiosity the way her slender forearm transitions from the physical to the insubstantial. How long has this been happening? *How could she not have noticed?*

Long-sleeved dresses and gloves of cream lace conceal from her husband and son her ongoing discorporation. The family gathers for dinner - always a punctual affair - and no-one comments on her odd appearance. The shepherd's pie is consumed, and eyes remain fixed on the Formica tabletop. "A little dry," murmurs Fred, her husband. "Could've done with more gravy."

*Perhaps someone can make me dinner, she thinks, perhaps, once, just once, I'd like to be the person passing judgement.* She clears away the plates without comment and brings in dessert, spotted dick and custard. *Perhaps I deserve a life too.*

At night as Fred slumbers, she hears - or imagines - chittering in the walls. On the edges of her vision wallpaper warps with the passing of dark things, up, up, and across the plastered ceiling, something testing boundaries. She pulls the duvet tightly over her head, eyes scrunched, feverish, chanting her childhood mantra, *only a dream only a dream.* Sleep overtakes her, eventually.

The days begin to merge into one. She spends her time in the kitchen, warmed by the two-bar heater with the fraying cable, gnawing on an old biro and completing word-puzzles from long-defunct newspapers, yellowing and brittle.

***Seven across (5): – purgatory dance, the Caribbean way***

The garden is overgrown. The garden is unrecognisable. The well-tended suburbs have been replaced by a vast plain of corn, waving and rippling, alive with unseen eddies. Something bestial moves within the crop. Sometimes there are animal screams, sometimes a fury of shredded flesh and crunched bones. Then silence, an unnatural stillness.

The letterbox clatters in the hallway. She gets up, abandons her tea, and catches sight of a large figure shambling away, made bloody by the door's stained-glass. The post lies on the neat Victorian tiles. Flyers for pizza companies, funeral plans - the only addressed post is to the homeowner, the occupier.

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“I have a name you know,” she says out loud, “I have...” and stops, perplexed, troubled. “I...”. She presses her knuckles gently into her temples and tries to remember.

Beneath the stairs is the cellar door. She skirts it, gives it a wide berth. Subway trains rumble in the deep, eerie, lonely trains, with brakes that screech like damned children, like her own lost baby. The door is kept locked, must never be opened.

It comes to her, the realisation that she has not seen another soul for days. Craving company, she digs out an old transistor radio. She twists the ancient dial but finds only static hiss, save for one station where a flat metallic voice reads number after number in neat sets of four:

*...twelve, eighteen, four, thirty-six.....nine, **DEAD**, twenty-two, seven....*

Suddenly a bird smashes into the kitchen window, then another and another, cracking the glass, smearing it with blood and feathers and the detritus of snapped bone. The radio wails with static feedback, and she hurls it across the room, flees the ruined birds and seeks sanctuary deeper in the building.

The sun and moon wheel across the sky. She is fading faster now, a ghost haunting her own life, no longer able to hold or touch or feel. Plates stack from sink to ceiling. The unfed cat wastes to bones. Windows, like cataracts, grime and darken in melancholy neglect.

The seasons turn and a chill settles on the house. The corn, so tall now, blocks all light to the kitchen, casts foul shadows on the far wall. The whole house is breathing. She enters a room and not-quite catches a figure leaving, the merest glimpse of her own retreating self. Stairs end in mid-flight. Rooms reconfigure in the night. And in her ears a low hiss of wind, or voices, sibilant and menacing. Everywhere, the eternal grey of twilight.

One morning, a green shoot sprouts from her sleeve, writhing and merging into the floral pattern of the dining room’s flocked wallpaper, which spurts into a bloom of joyous blood red flowers. More shoots follow, from her sleeves, from beneath her skirts, joining and melding, pulling her in, until she is fully papered over, until only her mouth and eyes remain uncovered.

Immobile, she watches and waits for someone to notice, for anyone to notice.

*I need help. Why can’t they see that? Surely they can see that?*

Days turn to weeks. Weeks, months. Months, years.