

Walls

by FranYo

I have a story to tell, a story about walls. Three of them actually. Walls that have saved me, comforted me, and finally, given me a reason to live.

Be sure you understand I'm not talking about the symbolic antics of "*Hey! Stay over there, buster*" or, "*Talk to the hand*" walls, but actual plaster, lathe and sheetrock walls you can touch and come to know—walls that seem to caress you if you need some love and understanding sometimes, and really, who doesn't?

At times I've cursed the walls in my life—damn papered walls of tiny pink rosebuds highlighting glossy gray globules; and other walls, victimized and destroyed forevermore with the stark reality of imperfect moments of outrage. Yet, I've loved walls that refused to do other than soothe me while the hammer came down hard, hard on love and loss, in a corner where there is strength as the walls, like people, came together.

I will tell you about the special walls in my life, three walls that starkly announced right-angled turning points, providing new visions for my redemption.

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My encounter with the first Wall was, as they say in Ohio when discussing tornadoes, a real doozie.

For the dozen years I'd been in the home, I'd loved my foster father as the home's rock-steady wage earner, a 'science-embraces-the-Scriptures' proponent, a church-going thinking man who'd never fathered children of his own. With no one to pass on his cleverness and obscure skills to, perhaps he felt frustrated by lack of offspring. He was my first and only standard of a good man. He was my dad.

During my time in his home I struggled with constant internal questions demanding to know what my life was going to be about. Did I like myself? Did I deserve to be alive? Growing up "foster"

meant that in every blink of my existence the question foremost on my mind became *Who, and Why, am I?*

I'm not sure how I provoked his anger, but the steam of emotion powering that fist came at me fast and came at me hard. Maybe he didn't like the personae I was trying for size that day. With no biological handbook from which to pick and choose familial traits or strengths, no cultural heritage of which I could be proud, I felt free to make it up on my own.

But with the plaster at my feet and the damage, right there, beside my ear—*oh!* so close—I knew that all trust was gone between us. The destroyed wall at the end of his fist matched our ruined relationship of love and respect.

The message took hold with the quick blinding burn of realization: One person I was NOT going to be, ever, in any way, was a victim.

Although I dared not yet move away from the gaping hole, that whisper of tattled tales sliding just past my ear had demanded I not hang around for any more anger coming at me. I knew I would begin a new way of living and loving, right then at that very moment. By the time the Spackle dried on the patched wall, I was gone.

I thank the first wall for taking that blow for me. You showed me never to try on the role of victim.

On the road driving away from that life I stopped to wonder if siblings usually have a type of love shared, dreams encouraged. I wondered if my brother was lucky enough to be sharing flashlight stories under bedcovers, getting can-do pats on the shoulder from people who liked him; if those other boys living in the dormitories of the military school with Gary were helping him to develop trust in others. I hoped he had it better than me. I hoped he was on his way somewhere, too.

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I've always loved the darkened corners where walls meet, the snugly, quiet corner spaces rarely occupied except by tiny spiders and settling dust motes. In foster homes I sought out the narrowest nooks, always dreaming and sometimes reading, debating whether

to follow the white rabbit down into the void of the unknown adventure, or not.

The second wall was located in an unwelcoming, different home, a way-station if you will, one not occupied by anyone especially known to me. Certainly I knew of no easy hideaway corner for me there.

The moment I walked in the door I sensed the sharp, jagged contrast between warm, inviting smells coming from an oven and the dripping sadness that hung thick in the air. Not two steps into the house I was handed something by a pair of swollen, red-rimmed eyes that wouldn't meet mine.

The clipping—*so perfectly and neatly cut from the newspaper*—was placed in my hand and I knew I was in trouble, that I would be needing a refuge, a corner into which I could become invisible. I knew that a big statement, something about reaching in and ripping out my heart, was in this four-by-two inch black, white piece of newsprint.

In a panic I searched for my bearings. Next to me, a corner space between the kitchen and the front door, and to my knees, into this space, crying without end, crying even now as I write this, I crashed with the paper in my hand, reading of his death two days before, while I had been enjoying fireworks in another town with another boy with laughter on my face, unaware.

Such a short obit, so little to say about nineteen years except that he had been born and was now dead, and was survived by people I didn't care about, other boys in the car who should be dead instead of Jerry, the boy who loved *me*. I wished them dead, all of them, his surviving sisters and the funeral director and everyone else who had known him yet continued to breathe, even myself, *especially* myself. I wished them dead.

So, to this second wall I am grateful for the comfort of your right-angled embrace, your tolerance for hateful accusations, the quiet counsel of allowing me to own my grief with no beatitudes of heavenly reward promised, no reminders that time heals all wounds.

Thank you, walls. Your counsel of inner strength and self-preservation has stayed with me and made me strong.

* * *

In the ten years since Jerry's death I learned much about life and how to be a friend to others and, importantly, to myself. I focused on how to build and destroy relationships, and came to the realization that for some people, like me, the deepest revelations were in the failures I experienced, dissecting them moment-by-moment.

But there was still a persistent sub-theme rolling, like nearing thunder, constantly through my head, lazily asking, *"Do you really think life is worth the effort?"*

No one would have picked me out of a crowd as the morbid one, but it was true that thoughts of easy exits floated through my consciousness regularly. I did my research—the easy methods, painless, guaranteed methods—and felt prepared to do, well, whatever.

And then, this thing with the walls again...

Down the hallway the walls were a meld of sickly green—that just didn't seem right for an IC Unit. I couldn't take my focus away from the walls. And when I rounded the doorway of his room to see our mother's form across the other side of the bed, I wasn't prepared in any way.

She was perfectly coiffed and yet strangely orange in color, with glowing white, spiked hair. Then there was dramatically bright red lipstick and the mouth began screaming questions at me.

Didn't I know she loved me? Wasn't she a good mother? Why? Why? She asked this over and over again and I guess she was speaking to me.

But I was frozen in the doorway, all thoughts drowned out by the white noise of those damn walls of puke green and the clicking, beeping of the equipment and the tubes sucking loud and somewhere, over there, she was still mouthing a stream of syllables. She backed herself up, hard into those walls, away from me and then I turned to look at him.

My sweet Gary, my older brother, destroyed and lying there in that goddamn hospital bed, artificially alive, the cacophony of

sounds rising in pitch and screaming into my ears, and those holes at either side of his head. And I knew. I knew. It was her fault.

And now she was staking her claim to good mothering before the shit hit the fan, before his blasted-away life proposed a compelling argument to the contrary.

Did he get in the way of your status, your claims of being a popular eligible divorcee? What about him as a six-year-old boy was so terrible you had to send him away? Isn't he's dead because of your neglect just as much as if you had picked up the fucking gun and shot him yourself?

Words, so many words I wished I could have said, but I could not. So the anger and the words were tucked safely away, and the details of reducing one you love from a scared, disappointed, sweetheart of a man, into a gaudy jar of ashes, got underway.

But, I digress. Sorry. I have third wall to tell you about, don't I?

I do loathe the third wall. It caught me short with its stark, harsh pronouncement of gore, yet I only hate it in the same sense that we hate our parents once in awhile, and usually because they're right. So, yeah, it's kind of a love-hate thing with the third wall, I guess.

My hate for the third wall? Who won't shove back when an insult is shouted straight into your face? The glob illustrated how we'd all failed him, were not there when everything became so unwound and messy and, oh, so tangled. The gesture of frustration with fore finger pointing a muzzle into the brain, thumb 'trigger' snapping back, didn't seem so funny anymore. The gray globule, low upon the wall, had glowed and called to me, demanding attention, implying a bold statement of familial shame, poor character and lousy choices and now, *now* damnation for all eternity. *Man!*

The love part? I felt like I found a little bit of him remaining behind intact and alive in some way. So what if it was brain matter splashed upon the wall? It was still essentially him, my sweetie-pie brother. I wished for it to be a gray-matter memory of some sunny day at the beach or a first kiss or learning to read the words *hippity hop*. I willed it to be the memory of something truly beautiful, cleverly left behind for me to find.

Finally, I chose to believe that this bit of Gary was his plan to have a 'big brother' talk with me, where he reminds me that that I'm strong, so much better than our bad-ass upbringing. He was saying to me that it's gonna be alright and to stay strong. For myself. For us both.

With the tiny bit of him found on the rosebud papered wall, it finally blasted into my psyche the reality that I, too, could make choices and plans for living as well as for dying. That speck of memory, there on the wall, that part of my brother who I loved and looked up to, that history was not going to be mine. I would choose to live.

And, just like that, the lazy, questioning voice left my head and never once came back to question my rationale for living.

Thank you third wall, for bearing that message of life and love and strength found in me. Yes, in me everything would work out.

