

Wallflower

by Katrina Dessavre

It was one of those weekday mornings in early spring when Marjorie and I could wander from chapel to chapter house with only security guards for company.

"I'll be in the gift shop," she said as I walked around the courtyard one last time, trailed by the light scent of citrus trees that leaned into the sunlight, leaves pressed against the glass. I kept my face down, watching the stone columns extend long shadows across the path, their grotesque faces dissolving at my feet. Just as I passed the tapestry room, a dense, almost putrid smell hit me.

It didn't have the sharp alcohol touch of cheap perfume but was cloying and fleshy, like the exhalations of saints or the liquid distilled from their relics. Branches crackled under my feet and I could hear barking in the distance. I started backing up, looking for the courtyard, until I hit a low fence half-submerged in the millefleur overgrowth.

My hand brushed against the flimsy, splintered wood, leaving traces of red I thought was my own blood. But they tasted sweet and tart, like pomegranate juice.

One by one, I picked up a blue damask collar, silver chain, and pair of rusted iron letters left scattered in a patch of moss. I had just managed to make out "A" and "E" when I heard intense sniffing and looked up to find those same initials embroidered on the collar of a greyhound, all slender limbs and bared teeth.

At the sound of a horn, I started running. After every thorned bush I brushed out of my way and every berry that exploded underfoot, I expected to reach a clearing that looked down into the Hudson valley. By the time I reached the marble fountain and plunged my face and hands into the clear water, my skin was covered in a thick, viscous crust, the merciless onslaught of a thousand flowers.

"Now! Take the beast now!"

Before I shielded my eyes, blinded for a moment by the sun's reflection on a spear pointed in my direction, I caught a glimpse of yellow silk stockings streaked with mud and a plumed hat missing half of its feathers.

"Walter! There you are," Marjorie said. She was picking up a stack of postcards from the hardwood floor. "Look at what a mess you've made. Why are you running around like a wild animal? And what's that?" She reached up and picked out a spiny branch of hawthorne from my sleeve.

