

Holly-Jane Rahlens

# Wallflower

A Novel

# Forth Floor Fiction

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*For Noah. Of course.*

# Content

- One *The Girl Who Lived in a Crack* 9
- Two *The Boy Who Came in from the Cold* 20
- Three *Pirates of Berlin* 34
- Four *When Mick Met Molly* 41
- Five *The Siberian Express* 49
- Six *Mitropa, Mon Amour* 55
- Seven *Mick in Legoland* 65
- Eight *Margot and Erich* 70
- Nine *The Iron Curtain* 74

Ten	<i>Berlin Alexanderplatz</i>	83
Eleven	<i>The secret Life of Molecules</i>	97
Twelve	<i>Confessions of an East German</i>	101
Thirteen	<i>From Berlin with Love</i>	110
Fourteen	<i>Pretty in Pink</i>	118
Fifteen	<i>The Red shoes</i>	124
Sixteen	<i>The Girl Who Came Out of Her Crack</i>	131
Thanks		136
About the Author		139



## *The Girl Who Lived in a Crack*

The Wall's down and I'm stuck. It's always been like that. Not the Wall, of course. It only fell two weeks ago. But me. I've always been stuck. In a crack. And I can't get out. If someone ever decided to make a movie about my life, they'd call it *The Girl Who Lived in a Crack*. It's like that *Twilight Zone* you can catch in reruns on TV where this little girl unintentionally slips through a crack in her bedroom wall and her father goes in after her and finds himself in a fifth dimension, in a hazy, abstract place where space, shapes, sound—everything—are distorted. That's how I feel sometimes. As if I were wandering around, aimless and dazed.

It's no wonder I get lost a lot. I try to pay attention, but then I start wondering, for example, why there are so many pharmacies in Berlin, and before I know it, I'm standing in front of the German Federal Pension Fund Office on Fehrbelliner Platz and have no idea how I got there or how to get home. In tourist guides, they're always boasting that Berlin has a pub on every corner. Not true! At least not where we live. But within a five-minute radius of our apartment, we have at least *nine* pharmacies. Is this indicative of a city full of sick people? Or of healthy people? It can go either way.

We live in the Charlottenburg district, we being me, Molly Beth Lenzfeld, eleventh grader, and my father, Fritz Lenzfeld, theoretical chemist. Please, don't ask me what a theoretical chemist is. It's complicated—you don't want to know.

So I'm spacey, I get lost a lot, and I'm currently living in Berlin-Charlottenburg. But not for long. Tonight we celebrate Thanksgiving big-time with our American neighbor across the hall, Bo Brody, and his German wife, Edda, tomorrow I pack my bags, and on Saturday I jet home to New York. *Auf Wiedersehen*, German Federal Pension Fund Office!

My father—I usually call him Fritz—will be staying in Berlin until July. We came last August for a year. When I told him a couple of weeks ago that I wanted to go home, he asked me to give it another try, to hang around at least until Christmas. But I'm not buying. It's time to go home.

My older sister, Gwendolyn—who's thirty-one and waitressing part-time at a Mexican restaurant off the highway near Burlington, Vermont—will be keeping an eye on me in New York. Conveniently, she just broke up with her seventeenth boyfriend this year and is looking forward to the change of scenery. Besides, she says, she can write the Great American Novel anywhere, even in Manhattan. Fritz, who in rare moments can be funny, teases her and says that the Great American Novel has already been written by several before her, including Melville, Twain, Salinger, and Shakespeare—to name only a few. But Gwen just ignores him and asks for another loan until her book is finished. I laugh. Gwen has no idea why.

“Shakespeare?” I say. “American? A novelist?”

Gwen groans and socks Fritz in the arm.

I don't mind staying with Gwen in New York. She's a good sport and probably *will* finish her novel some day, but, frankly, we're not a perfect fit. She couldn't care less, for instance, about the number of pharmacies in Berlin. If she were here, she'd probably go out and count the pubs instead. I'm more

of a homebody, whereas she's always dragging me places that I don't want to go to, to smoky art exhibition openings, or tattooists that brand her upper arm with the name of her fourteenth boyfriend this year, or to the top of the World Trade Center for an early power breakfast with boyfriend number sixteen.

I take after Fritz, whereas Gwen is like Leonora. Leonora Sophia Lenzfeld. It's a beautiful name, isn't it? That's my mother. *Our* mother—a stunner if you ever saw one. Gwen takes after her, and not only in the beauty department. Just like our mother, she makes friends easily, she reads poetry out loud, she prepares great mashed potatoes. And like Leonora, Gwen can also fasten her bra behind her back in one second flat. I don't know how she does it. Maybe because she has so much experience taking it off and putting it back on with the guys. I, in any case, fasten my bra in front and then twist it around my stomach to the back, and then I slip my arms into it. I suppose Gwen would teach me how to do it the right way if I asked her.

My mother, who was a dedicated high school teacher, definitely would have if she had lived. But she didn't. At least not long enough to show me. I had just turned eleven and was not yet wearing a bra when she left us. It was very traumatic. Her death, that is, not the fact that I wasn't yet wearing a bra. One morning after breakfast, she went to the doctor's with a stomachache, and when she came home for dinner, she had cancer. Of the pancreas. Four weeks later, she was gone. She was so busy making friends and reading poetry out loud, mashing the potatoes, and putting her bra on the right way, that she missed all the warning signs—not that pancreatic cancer has many. And not that they stick out like a sore thumb.

You can't believe how many people came to the funeral. There wasn't enough room for everyone inside the chapel, so they were piling up on the sidewalk, mingling with the shady characters hanging out in front of the off-track betting office two doors down. Leonora's homeroom class came: thirty-five tenth graders. The Korean green grocer on Broadway was there, my mother's Russian manicurist, and all of my sister Gwen's accumulated boyfriends from the years 1975–1984. There were many. Everybody adored my mother. Everybody. But no one more than I did. Except maybe Fritz. And Gwen. But I was only eleven. So naturally the loss was greater.

**It's gray out today**, like most days in November in Berlin, like a black-and-white photograph from the 1930s in one of my mother's old photo albums. Murky skies, bare trees, cobblestones the color of pumice and charcoal. Old ladies leaning on canes roam the streets bundled up in bulky gray woolens and fat brown fur hats. Sometimes a color floats by, a bright yellow mohair knit coat on a stately African woman, a royal blue poodle hat on a toddler in a stroller, an explosion of pink from heather bushes displayed at the florist's up the block. The yellow and blue and pink seem so incongruous, fake almost, as if small areas of the black-and-white photograph had been colorized.

Gray, murky, bare. That's how I envisioned Berlin one bright afternoon in New York last June when Fritz told me he had won the grant. We were at our favorite sushi place on Amsterdam Avenue near Seventy-third Street when he broke the news. I almost choked on my chopsticks. He might as well have said we were relocating to the far side of the moon, to Mars, or beyond.

Fritz is a kind father. He hoped I would see the year in Berlin as an adventure, would re-create myself in a new environment, experiment, take to Berlin like a match to a Bunsen burner. Well, he was wrong. He may be a chemist, but when it comes to me, he's out of his element. He worries that Leonora's death has locked me off from the world. He forgets that I simply don't embrace change. Period. I get stuck. And I did.

Berlin was doomed from the start.

**I'm in a hurry.** Thick wet drops of gray mush start to fall as I dart past the sidewalk snack stand and slip into a tunnel that leads to the S-Bahn, Berlin's elevated rapid transit train system.

It's freezing in the tunnel. I'm glad I put on my fur-lined boots, winter slacks, wool knee socks, lambskin duffle coat. I throw the hood back, though. I don't like how it flattens out my hair. I have a new cut, a short, curly, brunette bob with bangs. It works.

My breath is steamy. When I exhale, I faintly taste the coffee I drank just before I left the house. I hope I'm going the right way. I've never been here. I take the bus to school—the German-American school in Zehlendorf. And sometimes I take the subway to Fritz's office in Dahlem, where university buildings mingle with the sprawling villas of the rich. But I've never been on the S-Bahn. Fritz says that after the Wall was built, West Berliners boycotted it for three decades because until a couple of years ago it was operated by East Germany, by the Communists, even the stations in the West. It takes a while to figure out the logistics of the setup. And I thought the New York subway was complicated!

The smell of stale, greasy french fries from the snack stand

outside trails in behind me, but mostly I'm smelling the detergent that has lingered on my freshly laundered clothes, on my underwear and my plaid flannel shirt. I noticed the scent when I ironed the shirt this morning, flowery-sweet and artificial. I'm very odor-sensitive, and I had to gag. But I put the shirt on, anyway. I needed to wear comfortable but warm clothes. I'm on a mission. Today, Thursday, November 23, 1989. To East Berlin. To be exact: to Greifenhagener Strasse in Prenzlauer Berg. To my mother's birth house. If I don't go today, when will I?

"Not much has changed since she left," Fritz told me.

Last August, shortly after we arrived in Berlin, Fritz went for a look. Without me. I stayed home and hid under the covers. I wasn't ready to go yet. Now I have no other choice because I'm leaving.

"It's falling apart—like most everything in the East," he reported. "The plaster on the façade is crumbling. You can see the brick and mortar underneath. The balconies look as if they're about to break off and plummet to the earth. It was odd. I felt like I was back in the middle of the war."

Fritz grew up in a small town in the province of Hesse. He, his mother, cousins, and aunts survived the war by the skin of their teeth. Some of the men, including his father, my grandfather, a Wehrmacht soldier, perished at the front.

Several years before that, some 400 kilometers away, Leonora and her parents, like so many Jewish families, fled Berlin. If they had stayed, they would likely all have been murdered in the death camps. My mother didn't know that then. She was only six and a half. Later, when she found out, she felt hugely ambivalent toward Germany. Maybe that's why I do too. But I think if she had lived, she would have come to take

a look. Eventually. Would have gone back to Greifenhagener Strasse. Like me. Today. Despite the mixed feelings.

I look to my right and try to imagine Leonora beside me: slender, tall (though not as tall as me), silver hair catching the lights. She was a fast walker. I was always slightly out of breath when I tried to keep pace with her. Sometimes she'd grab me by the arm and point the way. She had a wonderful sense of direction. And a very strong grip.

I dip my hand into my pocket and pull out my Berlin Transit Authority (BVG) map. Which train line do I take again? The West lines are in various colors. The East lines are all black. There it is. The turquoise line, the S3. I take it to the last stop, Friedrichstrasse, cross the border, then take a black line east, then another black one north. A thick gray border runs through the middle of the map. The Berlin Wall.

I slept through most of the excitement on November 9. I'm a very sound sleeper. I'd gone to bed early, around ten. The doorbell woke me up. It was Edda and Bo Brody, our next-door neighbors. And then Fritz knocked on my bedroom door and said the Wall was down and did I want to go downstairs and celebrate, perhaps take a walk with them?

At first I didn't know what he meant. What wall? There was a wall in our backyard where all the trash cans were lined up, but . . . And then when I understood that they were talking about *the* Wall, it didn't immediately strike me as quite enough of a reason to get out of my cozy bed for, at least not in the middle of the night. But when they were gone, I couldn't fall back asleep right away and I went out to the balcony and I could see the Kurfürstendamm and hear the noise, all the cars honking and the people whooping. And I thought, *Wow, the Berlin Wall, this is historic. Maybe I should be a part of it.* But the

fact was, I didn't *feel* a part of it, so I went back to bed and slept through it until—

“Hey, Molly Moo!”

I twist around, startled.

It's Carlotta Schmidt, from my homeroom class. I said my good-byes yesterday. I never thought I'd see her again.

“Boo! Molly Moo!” she says. A drop of her saliva lands on the tip of my nose.

I hate it when Carlotta Schmidt calls me Molly Moo.

“What are *you* doing here?” she wants to know. The way she says it, you'd think there was a law against me walking in the S-Bahn tunnel. No matter what Carlotta says, it's always shrill and it always sounds like she's mocking me. She's a real nightmare, too, a cross between Madonna, the pop singer Olivia Newton-John, and the German TV Lotto hostess, Karin Tietze-Ludwig. She has Madonna's bod, Olivia's bleached blond perm, and Karin's blank smile. She dresses, though, like the hookers who descend upon the Kurfürstendamm after dark. That cracks me up. The Kurfürstendamm! The classiest boulevard in West Berlin! Imagine, if you will, prostitutes hanging out in front of Tiffany's on Fifth Avenue or strutting up and down with the monks past St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Today Carlotta's wearing a skin-tight, neon-pink tube dress that stops just above her knees, high-heeled, skintight black-patent boots that reach just below her knees, black tights, and a black leather aviator jacket with shoulder pads like a football player's. The jacket hugs her waist. She must be freezing her butt off. Good.

She smiles her Lotto hostess smile, and I see a smear of red lipstick on her front tooth. Well, let her walk around with lipstick on her teeth. I'm certainly not going to tell her.

“I have some last-minute shopping to catch up on,” I say.

I’m definitely not telling her that I’m on a mission, that I’m going to Prenzlauer Berg. She’d find a way to use that information against me somehow. Although who knows why I care? I leave Berlin on Saturday, anyway.

“Love your boots,” she says.

You see! That’s what I mean! She’s mocking me. She *hates* my boots. She wouldn’t be caught dead in them. Even I don’t want to be caught dead in them. They look like paratrooper boots. In fact, they *are* paratrooper boots. I bought them at an army and navy store downtown, near Delancey Street. When you have a size twelve shoe like I do, you can’t always be choosy with your footwear.

That’s another reason why Berlin was doomed from the start. I can’t find a pair of decent shoes in this town. No one, absolutely no one, it seems, has big feet, not even the boys in my grade. Not that I ever look at them—the boys, that is. And not that they ever look at me. How could they? They only come up to my chin. I’m a big girl. Not heavy, mind you. Just tall. Very tall. Six foot one—and possibly still growing! Gargantuan feet, massive hands, substantial breasts. I am a tower, a mountain, a monster of a girl. If Hollywood ever decided to do a remake of the movie *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman*, I’d get the title role hands down: *Molly Lenzfeld—she was more woman than any man could handle.*

And if they ever did a movie about Carlotta Schmidt, they’d call it *Young Slut on the Loose: For the first time ever on-screen, the awesome spectacle of Carlotta Schmidt’s mating ritual! See the boys drool. Hear their hearts pound. Smell their hormones cook.*

“By the way,” says Carlotta. “I saw a shoe store with extra-large sizes. For extra-large women. They looked nice. In case

you're shopping for shoes." Her tone has a definite sarcastic edge to it. Did she have to say "extra-large" even once, let alone *twice*?

"Oh?" I say, feigning interest.

"On Nürnberger Strasse. Or Passauer. Somewhere back there in Schöneberg."

I know the store. It caters to transvestites. I bet she knows it's a shoe store for queens. She's making fun of me again! The slut.

We're approaching the steps up to the S3. A sign reads "FRIEDRICHSTRASSE."

"I have to buy a ticket," says Carlotta. "Ciao, ciao."

*Ciao, ciao*—how phony can you get?

"Oh!" she adds. "I'll see you tonight."

"Tonight?" I say—a little rudely, I should add.

"At Thanksgiving dinner."

"You're going to be there?" I say, even more rudely.

Of course! Our neighbor Bo Brody knows her mother, Audrey Rockwell-Schmidt, an ex-pat who helps Americans with their tax returns.

Carlotta's face clouds up. "Well, excuse me for wanting to celebrate Thanksgiving!"

She swings around and makes a beeline for the ticket counter at the end of the tunnel. Good riddance.

I turn to the staircase.

*Ciao, ciao.* Jeez.

I start up the stairs to the S3 train.

Hmm. Maybe I shouldn't have been rude. Maybe she really *was* trying to be helpful. Maybe she *did* see a nice pair of shoes at that store and honestly thought they'd be right for me. Maybe I'm just reading her wrong. Rachel Schwartz,

a therapist I spoke to a couple of years ago, said that I may sometimes misinterpret nonverbal signals.

Now I feel bad. I should have given Carlotta the benefit of the doubt.

I turn back around. “Hey!” I call out.

Carlotta keeps walking.

“Carlotta!”

She’s snubbing me now, refuses to turn around.

“You have lipstick on your front tooth!” I shout over to her.

She still has her back to me, but she raises her hand above her head and gives me the middle finger. It’s a nonverbal signal that even *I* understand. I shrug and climb the steps to the platform.

Well, I tried, didn’t I?