

## The Wallflower Reunion

He watched in the mirror as the blood followed a slow, convoluted path and dribbled down his neck. The hand holding the razor froze, as a paralyzing thought pounded his brain. *What if she doesn't recognize me?* Frightened and horrified, he stood in his Buck Naked underwear and stared into the mirror.

Moments later, his attention returned to the razor cut dribbling a growing amount of blood onto the soft folds of skin that coursed across his neck. Rick Steps snatched a wad of toilet paper and dabbed at the blood. *Too much blood.* He collected another wad and pressed it hard against the stinging razor nick, holding it until he thought it would stop bleeding.

He left a torn sheet of toilet paper stuck to the slit in his neck, knowing from experience it would stanch the flow of blood and allow him to continue shaving. Negative, troubling thoughts continued to plague him until he finished up, removed the toilet paper, and made sure the wound would not bleed anymore.

The high school reunion dinner would begin at six tonight at the local country club. Everyone would have to walk up the grand entrance stairs to the upper level where the welcoming committee would be waiting. Chrissie Manuess would be among them.

The room was not warm, but a cold sweat broke out, sending rivulets of perspiration running into his eyes. He grabbed a hand towel and pressed it against his face and wiped the sweat from his eyes.

“Jesus Christ, it’s only 7:30 a.m. and I’m already anxious about this whole thing.” After taking a deep breath, he let the cold-water faucet run while dipping both hands into the cooling spray and splashing his face and forehead.

*I am an important attorney of law. I’ve argued cases in front of the Minnesota Supreme Court and won, for God’s sake! Why am I so nervous about a stupid, high school class reunion? It’s been thirty years!* The perspiration reappeared on his forehead. He splashed more cold water on his face. *I’m forty-eight years old, been married, divorced, raised children. I am successful and reasonably good-looking.*

He threw up in the toilet.

Vomit had splashed his underwear so he peeled them off and slipped another pair on. Dressing quickly before another wave of nausea returned, he went to the kitchen and

poured himself a cup of French Roast before plucking yesterday's local newspaper from the front porch landing.

He retreated to his den where he sat in his favorite chair and began reading. Unable to concentrate on any story except the one concerning the upcoming 30th high school reunion, he turned the page and read.

The reunion would begin with a dinner at the Stanton Country Club Friday night at 6 pm.

*Tonight!*

It ended Sunday with a bicycle ride through the woods of the nearby nature center; a beautiful, hilly trail that also passed through restored prairie lands and tall, old growth pin oaks. A wealthy family had donated the large parcel of land that made up the nature center. It was appropriately named, The Stanton Nature Center. Along with the Stanton Country Club and Stanton grocery stores, it was the most robust symbol of the power of one family to dominate a community, and then give something back.

Steps laid the paper on the wide arm of the chair he sat on, leaned backward, and tried to analyze his irrational fear of meeting Chrissie Manuess again. He had been a wallflower in high school, extremely shy and unable to make friends or talk to a girl. He had wanted to try out for sports but was cursed with a total lack of confidence in his physical abilities. He had never considered himself ugly, and one of his aunts had always gushed over "how good looking" Ricky was, but it was never enough to liberate him from his shell and take chances.

Beginning in eighth grade, Chrissie Manuess had always fascinated him and made his heart ache with desire, but, it wasn't until a momentous day in high school when a ring hit the hallway floor near his locker and came spinning toward him that a social opening occurred. Quickly, he bent down to pick it up, and as he rose, saw Chrissie Manuess smiling that million-dollar smile as she walked to him.

"Uh, is this yours?" he stammered as he held it out for her. She took it with all the grace of the Queen of England.

"Yes, it is, thank you so much for getting it for me." Her gaze lingered as she waited for him to say something clever, or so he thought.

"Uh, that's okay."

Chrissie Manuess remained standing while she watched Rick, then finally, slowly, sadly, walked away as Rick ignored her.

Rick turned to his locker and resumed inputting the combination to the padlock. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

For days, weeks, months after “the incident” he kicked and cursed himself for his response.

My God, how could I have been so stupid, he thought. *She threw her ring down in front of me so I would pick it up, give it back, and then we would talk. I’m sure that’s what she did. She made the first move and I blew it. Well, I’m not going to blow it this time...I hope. But wait, maybe she’s married now with several kids and how could I...*

The doorbell rang. He got up and rushed to the front door and opened it. A Fed Ex driver held a package and an invoice to sign. He scribbled his name, thanked the driver as he accepted the package and brought it inside. It must be the running shoes he had ordered online. He had never ordered shoes online before, never trusted the sizing, but gambled on these. He tore the package open.

Adidas Ultra Boost: lightweight, perfect balance and fantastic support. He turned one shoe in his hands, admiring the sleek styling and feather-like weight. *I’ve gotta try these right now. Running will help me relax a little.*

He changed into his running clothes and burst out the front door. His run began down the front sidewalk, across the street and then onto the twisting roads of the cemetery. It was devoid of living, breathing humans, except for him. Runner’s high hit him like he was flying through clouds. All his anxiety disappeared as his speed increased. He felt as light as a blade of grass when he exited the other side of the cemetery, flew onto Fourth Street, and headed north to the fairgrounds.

He ducked onto the entrance driveway, slowed his pace, and listened to the farmyard noises that emanated from the buildings that were stocked full of sheep, cows, pigs, and their Future Farmers of America teenage handlers. He wound around and in between the buildings finally leaving the fairgrounds through a backstreet alley that took him behind a tiny strip mall. After two miles of slow jogging, he hit his turnaround point and looped back toward his house.

Rick began running full tilt, maintaining all-out effort for two blocks before backing off and slowing his heart rate. He kept up interval training for the last mile and a half of his run, alternating between full-out sprints and a near walking pace.

When he reached his driveway, he finished his last sprint and walked to the front door. Checking his Fitbit, he noted his pulse was a hundred sixty-five, smiled approvingly, and walked in through his unlocked front door.

Showering for the second time that morning left him refreshed, as he took his time and reveled in his relaxed state of mind. The anxiety experienced earlier, did not return, leaving him with the comforting thought he was over it and would be fine when he attended the dinner tonight.

He spent the remainder of the late morning and afternoon reviewing an upcoming case and then rewriting some of his own recreational essays he planned to share with his writing group next week.

Five p.m. caught him by surprise, as he was still deep in thought. Closing his laptop computer with an intense slam of the lid, he worried about damaging it, so quickly opened and checked to make sure everything still worked. Satisfied that it did, he closed it carefully this time, and rushed into his bedroom to dress for dinner.

While checking himself out in the mirror, he saw that the razor cut on his neck was no longer noticeable. Moving to the full-length mirror in the hallway, he admired the figure he cut in the impressive power suit he chose to wear tonight. *Chrissie Manuess beware!* Not a scintilla of anxiety affected him. He was pleased. Retreating to routine and making sure he looked good in his new suit had done wonders for his mindset.

He popped a breath mint in his mouth, plucked his car keys from the hook next to the refrigerator, and stepped into the attached garage where his Audi R8 Spyder with six speed manual transmission and Quattro all wheel drive awaited. *If she sees me drive up in this, she will be impressed.* The car's starting price was \$129,000 and he had added several, expensive options.

After settling into the luxurious drivers seat, he opened the near-silent garage door and eased the Audi R8 out the driveway and onto the empty street. Driving carefully, he used fifteen minutes to accomplish the normally ten-minute drive to the Stanton Country Club. He parked in his normal spot.

Flushed with confidence, Rick exited the Audi and did his lawyer walk to the massive front doors of the club.

“Rick? Is that you?” Henry Wallace asked as he met him while opening the door in Rick’s face.

Rick flashed a smile, but didn’t remember the classmate, so he gave him a questioning look.

“Henry Wallace!” The man blurted. “I’m not surprised you don’t recognize me. I’m a hundred forty pounds less than I was in high school.”

Rick tried to remember, but honestly couldn’t match a face or obese body to the name. So he lied.

“Henry,” he marveled. Looking him up and down, Rick sounded sincere when he said, “I can’t believe it. You look great! How’d you do it?”

“Low carb diet. Julie and I both went on it six years ago and the weight just flew off.”

A pretty woman stepped between the two men. Rick couldn’t help but notice the shapely figure and blond hair as she stood for a second and looked at him.

“Julie?” He ventured a guess.

“I can’t believe you remember me,” Julie gushed. But then she added, “I was so fat back then with no friends... except Henry.” She looked up at Henry making it obvious she adored him.

“Well, I was pretty different then too, I can hardly believe that Henry recognized me right away.” An awkward silence engulfed them for several moments until Henry and Julie excused themselves to retrieve a couple bottles of Seven Deadly Zins from the trunk of their Lexus.

Reverting to the shy, high school student he had been thirty years ago, Rick stuttered, “Uh, okay. I’ll see you inside later, Henry...and Julie.”

*Get a hold of yourself. You are Rick Steps, Attorney at Law.*

Despite his self-admonitions, his legs were wobbly as he ascended the stairs where the welcoming committee awaited him. A diminishing line of classmates was ahead of him. The line was long enough so that he could not see any of the welcoming committee. He chit chatted with a man and his wife directly in front of him as the line seemed to, no, definitely sped up, and Chrissie Manuess, in all her beauty

appeared. Shoulder length hair was still blond, although maybe touched up a little, he thought. Her lips appeared more full and sensuous than he remembered. And her figure, My God, what a knockout she still was.

His knees wobbled and his heart pounded, as he keenly felt beads of perspiration form on his forehead. *It's a good thing I brought my handkerchief.* He surreptitiously removed it from his jacket and dabbed along his hairline and brow.

He barely managed to comprehend a word said to him by the couple in front of him, as his eyes remained focused on Chrissie. *Chrissie!*

She was eight feet away; beyond gorgeous in a pale, blue designer dress cut just below the knee. A white corsage pinned to her shoulder strap appeared to reflect her perfect skin tone. She smiled and shook hands or hugged every classmate in line, laughing that perfect laugh.

She was so close that the scent of her body wash, perfume, or whatever glorious concoction she wore wafted past his senses and drifted directly to his brain. *Check for rings. Check for rings! No rings! Hallelujah!*

“Rick Steps!” Her smile was warm, sincere, and disarming as she took hold of his elbow and pulled her toward him.

“Chrissie, you are as beautiful as the day we graduated.” He was astounded that he had been able to speak, especially without stammering. I must be on attorney auto-pilot, he thought.

Her smile broadened as she clasped his hand tightly. Leaning into him, she whispered in his ear, “We have to talk later. Please find me.”

A bit taken back, Rick nodded weakly and said, “I will... for sure.” Her hand guided him to the next host who delivered a warm handshake and welcome, before pushing him to the next and then the next.

It was over! Just like that. It was over! After stopping off at the bar for a whiskey sour, he drifted into the spacious dining area where several former classmates ignored him. That was okay, because he really didn't recognize any of them. The uncomfortable feeling he had while standing in line returned as he realized that this was probably the worst idea he had ever had in his life. *Who was I kidding? I really didn't know anyone*

*in high school. Why would I expect anyone to recognize me? But Chrissie did! How? Why? Later, I'll find her and we'll talk.*

All around the room, conversations buzzed and classmates laughed. He overheard people saying, "Remember when..."

*God, this is ridiculous!* He was hot; perspiration reappeared on his forehead. He dabbed it again while leaning against a wall. An interminable five minutes passed. *Okay, that's it. I'm out of here!*

He set his empty glass on a circular server's table as he hurriedly walked to the top of the grand staircase. Five steps down, he heard a voice call.

"Rick, wait!" Chrissie Manuess, wearing what he deemed to be a very concerned look, rushed down the stairway and placed a hand on his shoulder. They stood, looking at each other for several moments before she spoke again.

"Please, we need to talk. I've waited too long for this, and I suspect you have as well." She waited for him to speak.

It was exactly like high school again. He swallowed and opened his mouth, but nothing came out. As his breathing quickened and perspiration speckled his brow, he turned to leave.

"No, that's not going to happen again!" Her grip tightened around his shoulder, stopping his momentum. "I'll walk outside with you. I have something I need to tell you." Her tone was earnest; her look was serious.

Rick was experiencing what he perceived to be an asthma attack. He used all of his willpower to fight it, but it was overwhelming his body and sapping his strength.

As he reached the bottom of the stairway with Chrissie's support, he panted, "I'm sorry, I have to sit down, now. I can't breath."

The concerned look on her face was evident as she helped him sit on one of the sofas near the restrooms.

She left him, saying, "I'll be right back." She hurried to the kitchen area, returning within twenty-seconds with a paper bag. "Breathe into this." He accepted the bag and began breathing into it. His lungs seemed to loosen as his pulse dropped and he became noticeably cooler.

"You look a hundred percent better," Chrissie said through a sympathetic smile.

He laughed lightly. "Thanks, I don't know why this happened. I uh, uh..."

“It’s okay. I think I know,” she said. He gave her a puzzled look.

“You know why it happened? Are you a physician now?”

“No, not at all, but I can recognize a nervous reaction when I see one.”

He started to protest, but stopped and stared into her face. She exhibited the most empathetic expression he had ever witnessed. As he began to say something she shook her head and stopped him.

“Years ago, when I threw my ring to the floor in high school, I didn’t realize how extremely shy and unconfident you really were. When you turned back to your locker and never said anything more to me, I was heartbroken, and angry. Years later, after I had married and had a child who was so hidden within himself, I thought of you, and how that’s why you probably were the way you were. I educated myself and eventually helped my son overcome his shyness. He’s now an attorney, like you. That’s why I wanted to speak to you tonight before you left. I wanted to thank you for helping me understand my own son.”

Tears filled her eyes as she looked at him.

He stared back in wonder, and then asked, “Would you like to return to the reunion and talk some more?”

She shook her head no.

He slumped and sighed as his head dropped slightly.

She said, “I’d rather leave here with you and go someplace quiet where we could really talk.”

He nearly cried with joy as he said, “I’d love to.”

She grasped his hand as they walked to his Audie R8 Spyder.