

Devon Lang

“The Wall”

Word Count 12,779

1. The Wall

There's a spot behind the trees, on Plymouth Drive by the park, where you can go over the Wall. The cameras and the guards won't see you. -You have to be a good climber, real quick about it, because kids aren't allowed to go over by themselves. -But every once in a while, someone did. One of those people was Frankie.

Frankie Rose Mulhern *always* followed the rules. She raised her hand before talking in school. She cleared the table and washed the dishes when it was her turn. She said please and thank you and excuse me. In fact, it is quite possible that Frankie had hardly broken a rule in her whole life except for looking, as many adults and classmates put it, “like a boy.” In fact, for the entire eleven and a half years of her life, Frankie had always thought that maybe if she could follow all the rules just a little bit better, her world would make sense. Then, maybe, the Empty would go away.

On the day it all started, Frankie was kicking rocks by the pond after school. It was early fall and still warm. Her hoodie was tied around her stocky waist, her jeans rolled up above her ankles. There had been a light rain on her way to the park, and wet bits of her short, black hair

Commented [1]: Standard manuscript formatting is one space between sentences, not two. If you ever send this to an agent or publisher, or publish it on your own, you will want to go through and delete all the extra spaces.

Commented [2]: This is such a great intro. You introduce a mystery and bring the reader right into the middle of the story. Well done.

Commented [3]: Tense change. You start in present and then move to past. Where and when is the narrator situated in relationship to the story? If it's all in the distant past and the wall has already fallen, you may want to start with past tense and stick with it.

Commented [4]: Ah, yes. But things are about to change. One thing you could think about as you get deeper into Frankie's motivations is letting us see a little more what this old Frankie was like, early in the story. Really, it's just another way to think about structuring it. You can, as you've done here, start with Frankie's deviation from her norm, then go back and fill us in. But you can also spend the first chapter showing us what Frankie's normal life is like while running through an undercurrent of newness. Both work, although the latter is sometimes simpler. Think about how in the first chapter of most of the Harry Potter books, JK Rowling lets us see Harry in his normal environment on pivot drive before (or as) she introduces the inciting incident.

Commented [5]: See my notes about Frankie's desire and motivation. Does she really jump over the wall that day randomly, because of some unseen force calling her? Or is she on a serious quest to try to rid herself of the Empty she hates so much?

fell over her eyes as she walked. Her feet squashed down the spongy grass, making mud bubbles gurgle from under her sneakers.

The wall was fourteen feet high, and you couldn't see anything over it without climbing something, which was strictly forbidden. Stucco and painted beige, the wall was topped with a metal fencing that pointed and dipped like wedding cake icing. The points looked razor sharp, and all of the sudden, on that soggy September day, a new, overpowering thought settled into Frankie's head. She wanted to touch one.

Frankie stopped walking and looked around. It was an odd thought to be having. Everyone knew that the other side was dirty and dangerous—filled with the people the wall was supposed to keep out. She was lucky to live in Republica, where people had fought long and hard to be safe and free. Only the Wild kids messed with Southland—listened to Southy music and talked Southy slang, talked about sneaking over. They were ridiculous, Frankie thought. She would never be like them. And yet, something was calling her to the Wall.

The ash tree she'd passed about twenty paces back was the spot everybody whispered about. Usually they cut tree branches that stretched close to the Wall but things had gotten disorganized with the government troubles in the last few years. The overgrowth was gaining ground. Fewer and fewer guards guarded the heavy doors that lined the Wall every half mile, with their retina scans and key codes to make sure everyone was staying on their own side. The guard she could see from where she stood leaned against a tree a good ways across the park, eating an apple.

Commented [6]: Great. You are really good at giving the reader memorable yet economical sensory detail. I can totally see the scene, but you don't linger so long in the description that it slows the pace. Not everyone can do this well, and you've nailed it.

Commented [7]: Nice.

Commented [8]: Again, Frankie is portrayed as a bit hapless here--strange ideas and mysterious forces cause her to make choices. Ultimately, it's up to you how self-determined she is, I'm just pointing out what I see.

“No,” Frankie told herself. “I am sensible and sensible people don’t break the rules. Rules are there to protect us. Just like the Wall.” Yet somehow she found herself sloshing back through the grass and standing below the ash tree.

Commented [9]: “Yet somehow she found herself...” Notice how Frankie’s lack of a clear goal works itself into the very language you use to describe her actions.

Frankie took a quick look around and hoisted herself up onto the lowest branch.

If you got caught on the Wall you were considered ‘at risk’ and had to do a program for two hours everyday after school where you write about your feelings and make “behavior goals.” Frankie knew because it had happened to Julia Buckberg, a girl two grades ahead of Frankie at school. In her defense, Julia was a great climber—wiped the floor with everybody in P.E. class. She only got caught when her little brother tattled.

Commented [10]: Just a thought – could there be more severe consequences for climbing the wall? Not even necessarily on the republic side, but known dangers on the other side? I guess what I’m sensing here is that the stakes don’t seem very high. In order to feel the anxiety of this moment more deeply, it either feels like (1) the consequences of climbing the wall need to be more severe or (2) we need to have a better sense of what a really really big deal it is for Frankie to break even the tiniest rule with the most piddling consequences.

Frankie had only gone into the Clayton City on the high-security Glidetram before, which ran on tracks followed a specific route. The Glidetram had a waiting area on there for kids where they could hang out and play games ‘til their parents were back from whatever business they were doing in the city. Out the windows she’d watched the crumbling buildings fly by, the tired looking people with their tattered clothes, always walking or on old bicycles. It was like another planet from the crisp, manicured lawns, shiny well-stocked stores, and polite smiles Frankie had grown up with on her side of the Wall. Frankie remembered Officer Bill, the safety guy from school singing the old song,

How lucky oh lucky oh lucky I am

To see the city from the tram

To be born here where the air is clean

Where life is happy and the grass is green

Commented [11]: Your world-building is detailed, convincing, and really fun. Details like this give your story rock-solid credibility. Good work.

The city is gritty and that is aaaaaaall-

That's why I'll never cross the Wall

Now Frankie climbed the ash tree to a branch level with the top of the wall and edged along it with her feet, holding onto another, until she reached the deadly metal icing peaks. With her finger she lightly touched a point. Razor sharp..... Carefully, she stretched her leg over a dip, making sure to hold tight to the branch above her, and placed one foot carefully on the other side.

Gripping the branch with white knuckles, Frankie took her first look at Southland. The crumbling, cracked street in front of her was deserted. Directly below her sat a dumpster overflowing with crates and water-stained cardboard boxes. A healthy gathering of flies zoomed around it and looked like nobody had run that trash route in at least a few weeks. She paused for a moment. This was definitely breaking the rules, but going down there would be over the top. She thought about going home.

Home, at 613 Forsythia Drive, was not a place that Frankie liked to be. **The Empty was worst at home.** The Empty was what Frankie called the feeling of nothingness, a cold sad feeling that gripped her chest sometimes. It was as if there was a wall between her and her mother and stepfather. In the living room, the hollies were always on, blaring the news or real-TV shows. It seemed that no one looked at one another. They spoke pleasantly, but seemed to stare through her.

"How was your day at school, dear?" her mother would ask, staring at the hollie with a vacant look on her face.

Commented [12]: Yes. She thinks about turning back but doesn't, because the Empty will swallow her whole. Do you see how much more focused and vibrant Frankie feels in these moments?

“Fine,” Frankie would say. Her mother would smile vaguely and continue watching.

“That’s nice, dear. Very nice.”

Inside, Frankie felt a fire building, a heat churning up in her belly that made her want to smash all of the shiny ornate glasses and scream, “Can you see me?!”

The Empty wasn’t just at home. It oozed out of the hollie screen. It crept along the hallways at school. It whipped in the wind with the flags that stuck out of plucky flowerpots on the neighbor’s perfectly trimmed lawns.

The only time Frankie didn’t feel the Empty was when she was alone in her room, drawing pictures....

Commented [13]: This doesn't feel like the right time to introduce this. You've got some killer momentum here with her climbing the wall and you don't want to lose it.

Frankie thought about turning around and walking home. Frankie had tried to be good. She had really, really tried. But today, she just couldn’t stomach it.

Commented [14]: We could know a little more about this. Why can't she stomach it? You mentioned earlier that Frankie used to think following the rules would prevent the Empty. What happened? Was there an incident that caused her disillusion. Why is "today" the day that she breaks the rules and climbs the wall?

Frankie stepped over the wall with her other foot, and crouched, moving her hands to a lower branch that reached over onto the city side. She slid down the wall and crashed without much grace onto the garbage pile, tumbled off the dumpster and landed in a dusty heap on the gravel, landing for the first time in her life on the soil of Southland.

2. Angel

Frankie stood up and brushed herself off.

Looking around, she gaped at the colossal crumbling buildings in the distance, with their boarded up windows and curling paint. The ones across the street were smaller, maybe only two or three stories. Most of these had tiny ramshackle huts on top, made from scrap wood and sheet metal roofs. Bulgy cactuses, drippy vines of flowers and rusted metal poles tumbled over the edges and up and down the walls. Garbage lined the streets. Laundry hung out on the rooftops, waving pretty in the breeze. Tents lined the sidewalks in some spots so you had to walk in the street. Stripped cars rusted in an alley nearby.

Frankie swallowed the lump in her throat, and pushed away thoughts of her mother as she began to make her way West along the wall, keeping one hand on its rough cool surface as she moved down the littered street. There weren't many cars, but the ones that passed were old and loud, coughing thick gray smoke in her face. Dogs with huge private parts and chickens trotted down the middle of the street.

The city smelled like toilet one minute, and then she would turn a corner and some delicious cooking food smell would crawl up her nostrils and make her mouth water.

Eventually, she hit a rusted fence and had to leave the wall and turn right to follow the street. ... That was when she began to see people. As she walked, people of all ages dressed in ragged clothing stopped her and offered to sell her things—necklaces, toothbrushes, pastries, car parts.

Children ran around barefoot with no adults in sight. Some of the people she saw, sitting on the sidewalk and squinting in the sun, glanced twice at her. A middle aged woman approached her, heaving a heavy basket of old kitchen utensils.

“Need anything today, son?” she asked.

Commented [15]: Great details--seriously--but remember that we haven't yet been introduced to the Republic, so the contrast isn't as obvious to the reader as it is to Frankie. We need to see her reactions to this strange, new place in order to orient ourselves in the world and in her point of view. Give us a sense of her mental and emotional processing of the sensory input here, e.g. "It was nothing like the Republic..." "They didn't even have garbage cans..." "It took her a moment to figure out why there were clothes hanging everywhere..." etc.

Commented [16]: What's Frankie's reaction? Gagging? Fear? The smell of human feces in the streets seems like it would be pretty intense for a kid who's never left the cozy suburbs.

“No thank you.”

“Cheap.”

“No thanks.”

The sun was starting to sink and Frankie was at least a mile from the clump of trees at the park. She was about to turn back when her ear caught a few notes of faint, eerie music coming from around the next corner. **Mischievous music. Alive music.** She walked a few steps forward and peeked around the cement, and found herself face to face with a small someone.

She was a string bean of a girl, about Frankie’s age, **with quick eyes, dark brown skin and thick corkscrew curls,** sitting on a wooden stool and playing an instrument Frankie had never seen before. (Later she would know it well as the *recordian*.) It looked like it weighed more than its player did. It had two shiny black blocks on either side where her hands were strapped in, **one side with deep red and pearl-colored keys,** and as she stretched it back and forth by flapping her arms in and out, it sucked and blew air through a crumpling tube in the middle. **The somber,** beautiful notes it wheezed sounded like they flew out of giant golden nose.

The girl pushed a button and at slow tempo, heavy brass drumbeats joined the eerie melody. Another button and the sound of bells chimed in. Frankie watched her, and after a moment the girl set the recordian down beside the little stool and it continued to play the song, only without the heaving in and out like before. **Then, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, she bent over, kicked her legs up in the air and started walking around on her hands.** A passerby held out a coin and she took it between her toes and tossed it right into the hat that lay on the ground. She flipped backwards onto her feet and juggled some clubs for a while. More

Commented [17]: Yeah. Something about this aliveness attracts Frankie. Slow down here and let us sink in. Has she ever heard music like that before? What does it make her feel like? How and why does she feel compelled to go toward it?

Commented [18]: I'm just going to keep pointing out places where you nail sensory detail and character description. Damn. You got this.

Commented [19]: Great. You describe actions in a very clear, visual, and economical way. It sounds like a weird compliment, but believe me, lots of people have trouble with this.

people stopped and gathered to watch her, some feeding a coin or two to the hat. Frankie watched, mesmerized.

Commented [20]: Give us more. What's going on internally for Frankie in this scene?

After the crowd had passed the girl pushed a button and the music stopped. She took a long drink from a jar of water, wiped the sweat off her forehead, and looked at Frankie.

"Hi ho," she said.

"Hi," said Frankie.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Frankie. What's yours?"

"I'm Angel."

She blinked. Then, as if someone had clicked her "on" switch, she began to speak rapidly.

"You look like some body who thinks for themselves! I know, radical concept: thinking for yourself, scoffed at nowadays! But the more important question is, can you DRINK for yourself?!"

Commented [21]: Love the word play.

She spoke a mile a minute, without a single breath or pause in a way Frankie had only heard on web-TV car commercials. It seemed very out of place coming from the tiny person in front of her.

"I—" was all Frankie got out.

"That's right! I said DRINK for yourself! I'm sure you're familiar with Paxlax, the Uplifter the City so kindly adds to your drinking water for your very own health and wellbeing! Well, being forward *drinkers*, we ask ourselves, what does the fine print say about Paxlax? It just so happens I have a copy here--"

Commented [22]: Angel is such an engaging character. This dialogue is *hilarious,* but there are parts when it goes on a bit too long. I've suggested a few edits, but when you re-read it you will be the best person to find what is essential and what can be trimmed. Consider what is essential to plot and character. You want to keep this moving, and right now the lengthy dialogue--though energetic--ironically slows the pace.

(She shoved a crumpled piece of paper into Frankie's hands.) "—of a city water contract! You are welcome to follow along the highlighted area with me as I read the lovely side effects!

We've got [nausea, cramping, dizziness, headaches, memory loss, hair loss, loose bowels, tight bowels, nosebleeds, blurry vision, skin irritation, ringing in the ears, sudden bursts of anger, fatigue, jitters, goose bumps, hives, shingles, bladder infections, hallucinations, delusions of grandeur, sweaty armpits, runny nose, vomiting, seizures, and gas.]”

She snatched the paper back out of Frankie's hands.

“I'm sure that as a person of obvious intelligence this troubles you, however the greater problem is that these products are MOOD-altering! Altering: also known as shifting, changing, transforming, MOVING. Why must the city MOVE our MOODS, you might ask? So that we will be easy to CONTROL! That's right! Easy! To! Control! We think we feel fine but do we really know how we feel? Not when we are all lapping like puppies at their fountain of placation! What is the solution, you ask? How do *I* become one of the brave souls to break the chains of mood control? Well, it's your lucky day because I have the answer! Yes, right here is a state of the art invention! A real whizzer! Would you like to see it? I! Think! You! Would!”

Angel pulled a small round thing out of the cardboard box, and handed it to Frankie. The base of it was a tarnished metal ring with tightening winches, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. It was covered by two layers of grey translucent film, with little copper-colored pellets tumbling around between them. It felt heavy in Frankie's fingers.

“Yes, this little device is a state of the art Reyes Incorporated Uplifter-removing WATER FILTER! Available only right here! This water filter that screws in discreetly under your sink has a unique mineral compound that traps and removes the Paxlax from your drinking water

Commented [23]: Possible place to trim. I skimmed this list once I got the gist. You might try having her list five or six, then have Frankie interrupt, then she can try to list two more, then have Frankie interrupt again. Just one idea. That would give the same feeling--a long, ridiculous list of symptoms--in a format that readers would actually engage with instead of skim, if that makes sense. I can explain more when we talk.

Commented [24]: Is Frankie going to let herself be steamrolled by Angel? If so, alert us to that inner conflict so her reaction feels more active (e.g. "She tried to get a word in, but Angel was so intimidating she froze up..."). If not, show us how Frankie might step up a bit and push back against her. We've lost sight of her motivations in all of this, and she's starting to come across as passive, which makes the scene less interesting than it could be, considering how dynamic and wild Angel is.

allowing you to exercise your human freedom to think and feel your on very own just as the Wallies do with their outlandishly expensive bottled water! And it's available today for a one time fair price of only nineteen-ninety-nine! NOW tell me, friend, can you and your family DRINK for yourselves? What do you say?"

Angel's speech dropped off abruptly. She took a deep breath, gulping the air, which had no room to get in between words. She stared at Frankie, waiting, without blinking.

"I, uh...I don't think I need one where I'm from," Frankie said. "But thanks."

"Actually, that's a common misconception," Angel replied. Her voice startled Frankie. It instantly became slow, natural, and gentle. "Where are you from in Parana? Or do you like in Colville? They put Paxlax in there too, but below the amount they're required to report."

"I'm not from Parana or Colville," Frankie said.

"Oh. Charlston? All of the South has Uplifters in our water, it doesn't matter what neighborhood...Oh my gosh," Angel paused. "I'm sorry. You're a tenter. Your clothes are so nice I thought for sure you'd have a house with running water. No shame! Me and my dad were tenters 'til I was four."

Frankie's head was spinning. "I'm from...over there." Frankie pointed in the direction of the Wall.

Angel raised one eyebrow ever so slightly.

"A Wallie," she said. That word again.

"Yeah," Frankie said. She didn't actually know what a Wallie was, much less if she was one. But she didn't want to seem out of the loop.