

**BRONTE WILDE**

RECENT PROSE WORKS BY FANNY HOWE

The Wedding Dress

Radical Love

The Winter Sun

What Did I Do Wrong?

The Needle's Eye

The Wages



# BRONTE WILDE

FANNY HOWE

grand  
**IOTA**

Published by  
**grandIOTA**

2 Shoreline, St Margaret's Rd, St Leonards TN37 6FB  
&  
37 Downsway, North Woodingdean, Brighton BN2 6BD

[www.grandiota.co.uk](http://www.grandiota.co.uk)

First published in the USA by Avon Books, 1976  
First UK (revised) edition, 2020  
Copyright © Fanny Howe, 1976, 2020. All rights reserved.

Typesetting & book design by Reality Street

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-874400-75-2

**Bronte Wilde**



When I was two years old a nun named John brought me across the Atlantic Ocean to Boston. It was a time when children were casually transferred from one person to the next. So I arrived in America as a ward of Catholic charity, and was soon after adopted by the Casements. They were affluent, middle-aged, childless; and affectionate without making physical contact. Both were practicing psychiatrists. Alice worked with disturbed adolescents and Henry worked with disturbed adults. Her office was on the ground floor of our townhouse, as you know; and his office was in a building around the corner on Commonwealth Avenue. Remember there was a big ugly plant and a green and gloomy waiting room for the children to the left of our front door where the dining room should have been.

When I was four years old and curious about pregnant women and the origins of life, Alice told me that I was nurtured in another woman's body, not her own, and that she had picked me out of a row of babies-for-sale because I had a wise little face. It was a time when people tended to pretend rather than confess, and being adopted, like being divorced, carried a stigma. So it was brave of her to tell me these facts. The effect on me was to her advantage. I felt I must be good and obedient all the time, in case she should change her mind about my wisdom and return me to the agency. I was grateful. They had done me an enormous favor by feeding, clothing and housing me. I am not saying this with any bitterness, because my feelings sprang from an insight that might be shared by any biological child. Yet I also sensed that I lived in a world in which I did not belong, would never belong.

They named me Mary. I called them Alice and Henry instead of Mummy and Daddy, and, as friends, we got along very well. I always wanted someone to call Mother but I also sensed that indifference had shadowed the narrow lips of the bearer of that name while her arm drooped protectively but casually before my infant body. I know at that time I was ashamed of how old my guardians were compared with the other parents, and it made it all the easier for me to disclaim any blood relationship with them. But they told me all that they could about those first two years of my life.



I met you finally at home. It was a rainy day, pouring and gray. I was sitting in my room watching my goldfish in a bowl in the window. My brain seized with a delirium that was already familiar to me. The rain as a backdrop dribbling on the glass behind the swift red fish – green weeds and hairy algae – in some way saved me the way music did. My parents would say I was ‘in an alternative universe’.

Then there was the gentle knock, Alice’s respectful touch. I called to her to come in. You were with her.

Mary, I want you to meet Honey Figgis. She’ll be starting at Mystic with you next week.

We said awkward *Hi*’s and Alice left us alone. You were dressed sloppily, I am sure. Falling socks, wet loafers, a sweater full of holes. Still, I know my first impression was one of glaring beauty.

I’m one of her patients, you announced.

Oh, she has lots of them our age, I told you.

My problem is I’m scared of school. I don’t know why.

Mystic is okay, I said, and you’ll be in my class. You looked around the room suspiciously, then gave me a winningly secretive grin.

Where's the bathroom? you asked.

I took you down the hall and went in with you while you peed. I looked at my face in the mirror and wished it was yours.

Is Dr Casement your grandmother?

No, my guardian. I'm adopted.

Oh you lucky!

Your heavy-lidded, deep-set, long-lashed eyes flashed while I quickly told you my story; it was a kind of nervous tic that was to be your mark. I don't know how you did it, the action was too quick, but when I tried to imitate it, I looked psychotic. Long legs, straight blonde hair, a bony face and thin sculpted lips. That was you. Remember how well we got to know each other? Every hair, mole, dent and shadow recorded in cars, subways, dressing rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, parks, school hallways. We knew each other better than we knew ourselves.

**B**oston. Beantown. A grim name for a grim city. Brick. A fishy smell on certain easterly breezes. Gray lumps of puddingstone. Ash, elm, chestnut, sycamore, maple, pine. Splashes of water. Somber rooms with low lights, books, a sense of enclosure; even the streets are like indoor spaces. We lived on the block of Gloucester Street that lies between Marlboro and Commonwealth. Institutions abound. Everywhere is a sign: schools for

secretaries, nurses, for social workers, offices for psychiatrists and dentists, and some apartments still domestic and fashionable.

Twice a week, down the street on the corner of Beacon, I took piano lessons. First with Stewart Loomis, long, tweedy, egg yolk on his tie, a half-zipped fly. Then with Melvin Marchand who drooled, and finally with Ramon who taught me until the scandal. From an early age I understood that music would be my main occupation and would serve to gratify Alice and Henry and pay them back for their generosity. Fortunately I was a music lover myself. Like those goldfish in the bowl, the notes on the page circled around in a corner of myself, wholly self-contained.

Alice and Henry took me to the Symphony every Friday afternoon. They yearly gave money to the Conservatory but I was their real contribution to the arts. Most of my afternoons were passed in the rich red 'music room' adjoining my bedroom. I practiced while snow, or rain, or patterns of sunlight drifted beyond my geranium plants. The worn Turkish carpet, smell of books, and a soft yellow lamp provided an atmosphere of resonant calm which will of course never return. On Sundays we went to lunch with Henry's mother and afterwards I was alone again with a book or the piano. It was a post-Victorian childhood trying to survive the twentieth century.

Henry had a slight stammer and a stoop that gave his

tall, lean figure an air of attention, sympathy, gentility. Pigeon-gray crew cut hair, a long compressed face, spectacles halfway down his nose. He twiddled his thumbs while listening: He had the air of a professor far more than a psychiatrist; he even rode a bicycle. He called me Maryberry.

Alice, in my mind, is autumnal, orange, marigold, sharp, spicy, tailored in plaid tweeds and soft cashmeres, a row of mother-of-pearl always worn at her throat, a scent of tobacco, sensible shoes, buck teeth, eyes set in heavy loose lids and fatigue circles, her cheeks heavy, her voice crumpled like a man's voice from smoking. She spent most of her spare time in bed, wrapped in a pale quilted dressing gown, the curtains drawn, smoking and reading. I stood a few feet away from her bed when speaking to her.

They never quarreled. They seemed to have nothing to quarrel about, yet I can't exactly say, in retrospect, that theirs was that miraculous situation called a happy marriage. It was functional, compatible and passionless. They were like siblings. Alice was committed to her work; they went out or entertained at least three nights a week; a woman cleaned and often cooked for them. But I cannot say that she was 'fulfilled'. Often she seemed sad. (Or maybe sadness is happiness since it is so interesting.) They were reticent about themselves, so reticent, in fact, that I knew little about their youth or their past. I would sit at the kitchen table with them and kick the

legs of my chair until they began to talk to cover up the irritating sound. They never told me to stop. I kicked in a code only I could crack, but when I heard the trailing whine of a trolley coming down the tracks outside, only then would my kicks subside, and the music of the metal wheels took over, leading to something resembling a memory.

Why do they call you Honey? I asked.

Honora is my disgusting real name.

Do you have sisters or brothers?

No, my parents hate each other.

What does your father do?

He's a professor.

Of what?

History. I have a dog too.

I just have fish, I confessed.

You spent the night at my house first and began in the dark to narrate your autobiography. I remember your raw whispers beside my ear, my legs hanging out the side of the bed for fear of physical contact with you. You said your father had crash-landed during the War in Sicily and was rescued by a family of Fascist Catholics. One of them was a beautiful woman whom he got pregnant. She was forced by her family to give the baby away, but he took the baby himself and brought her back to America with him at the end of the war.

That's why my mother hates me, you concluded, not

noticing the violence of my reaction to this narrative, this utter fraud. I actually concealed my rage from you by running to the bathroom and grinding my teeth and tearing at my hair in the darkness there. You had twisted my own true story into your fantasy!

When I returned to the bed, you added to your conclusion this important detail: 'That's also why my father has those pictures of Mussolini and Hitler in his study.'

Do you remember those endless whisperings night after night? To this day I find the sound of a whisper repellant, almost evil.

But then I whispered aloud a huge fake future for you, and one for me, and in this way shifted your focus onto that and away from the fraudulent past. We lay in my bed sometimes until the sun rose pink and gold in the room like two short-term inmates exchanging fantasies about the future.

I saw your mother a while back. Browsing through books in Providence, she wore bedroom slippers and a trench-coat. It was snowing outside and her ankles were red. In fact it was her slippers and ankles that I recognized first under a stall of books, and then her face, its high flush, her hair dyed blonde. I rushed away from there before she could see me.

My mother doesn't care if I smoke, you say, taking a deep drag. Have a weed.

I say no, and it makes you mad.

You flounce away, leaving me in front of Hayes-Bickford. So I take the subway home to my piano and see my face on the black underground window, swaying, frizzy black hair, and a pale center. I am overweight and disgusted with myself. Often you make me feel this way: too heavy to soar, a bear keeping up with a deer.

But you need my slow dark presence at your side, especially at first at school. You stick by me and by the door, claustrophobic in the classroom, crushed by the role of silent listener. To be lectured to: it makes you tremble and sweat. You have no defense against the voice of authority. The palms of your hands slide across the roof of your desk. You ask to be excused from a class at least three times a day, when you hide in the bathroom smoking. The teachers know you have a problem, and you are so rich and pretty, you are treated by one and all with care.

One afternoon Alice came to me and said she wanted to have a little talk. It was a winter day, dreary, void of snow or cheer, and I was hiding in my music room with my homework, probably waiting for you to call. Alice was always intent on avoiding her professional role in her relationship with me. She never, if possible, had 'heart-to-heart' talks. Now she asked me how I was doing in school.