

1985

The Rights of Spring

Leigh Walton
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Walton, Leigh (1985) "The Rights of Spring," *Exile*: Vol. 32 : No. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol32/iss2/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

The Rights of Spring

Mr. Martin Wallace drives the one and half hours, each way, every Sunday to see her. Anyone could make the trip in 40 minutes but Mr. Martin Wallace likes to savor the tranquility of country roads trafficked only with churchgoers. And if he makes sure he is in his car by nine, he can catch the beginning of the Lester Lanin Morning Special and arrive at Oakwood by the finale.

A hat, usually with a small feather or tassel, and a pipe with fine London tobacco is all he brings on his journey. For her he brings the *Times* crossword puzzle, the new yarn and patterns she requested, orange tea, and gold on her birthday. This time he brought some empty Band-aid tins and a small vanity mirror. Lately, she has taken up painting household objects with the same talents her mother had. She is planning on making personalized mirrors for Christmas this year, instead of sweaters. He also has pictures of little Peggy's fourth birthday last Tuesday. They wrapped up a piece of cake for him to bring to her, and Peggy drew her a picture. She'd put it up on the cork board with the rest of them.

Mr. Martin Wallace always parks in the same spot each week. He has no problem with others taking it. He always arrives half an hour before visiting hours open to have a smoke and wash the salt and sand off the car windows. He keeps Windex and cloth in the trunk, along with a flashlight and jug of fresh water, in case of emergency.

She chose Oakwood without his guidance. It was her lungs that were going, not her judgement. She selected it immediately because its sun room reminded her of the solarium in her father's house on the lagoon: yellow and white with many pictures of patients at the country club golf tournament or at their most successful garden party. The first time he came to visit, Martin brought the picture of her with Betsy Bloomingdale at a charity ball in Palm Beach. She hung it next to Ginny Meredith dancing with Bobby Kennedy and felt triumphant.

Three years ago they told Martin that the cigarettes had won the battle and she now had only one functioning lung. If they monitored it with a respirator she would have another six to eighteen months. The doctors hinted, strongly, that Martin tell her this. Martin figured the doctors feared she'd begin pitching ashtrays or stabbing at them with her size 8 needles if they were to break the news.

Martin rented a room by the lagoon for a long weekend and told her there. This was a bold move on this part, Martin hated water. Actually he feared it, feared that one day there wouldn't be enough salt left in it to keep him afloat. The only time he could stand to be near it was when he hoped its spray and stench would revitalize whatever was soon to expire.

When he told her, she smiled, lit a cigarette and walked to the dock. Martin flushed the remainder of her pack down the toilet and read the morning paper. When she returned she simply suggested that they search out the most appealing hot house that would allow her to flourish radiantly before she withered. "Like flowers we are," she told him, lighting another cigarette from the pack she kept in her pocket, "as transient and always most ravishing moments before wilting."

She is sitting with her back to him as he enters the sun room. There is a portable respirator at her side and Martin can see that she is attached. The young nurse is recording Eleanor's rate of respiration and tells her she can "go ahead;" Martin notices he has begun to sweat a bit and begins unbuttoning his overcoat. The nurse smiles at him on her way out.

"What have we here, Ellie?" He walks over to her side and pats her hand. "I thought that never left your room."

Martin smiles at her without parting his lips and places the crossword puzzle on her breakfast tray. Eleanor Mackay is still beautiful, and her hair as white as talc. Her dress suggests she's been to mass; the wrinkles tell him her night was restless and she was up early. The sun is bright and glaring into the solarium off last night's snowfall. The tulips on her tray are full and stand at attention. She pulls the bifocals off her nose and lets them fall to the end of the gold chain around her neck.

"Bad night?", he asks without waiting for a reply. "I didn't sleep well either."

She grins and points to the chair opposite her chaise. She untapes the plastic tubing from her mouth and turns off the respirator. Her chest rises and falls in short, quick jumps and she coughs once. Martin thinks her skin looks a bit thin but her lips are still as red as a drunk's. He relaxes a bit.

"Heat was on too high last night. I nearly suffocated. I'm feeling better though," she waited for him to nod in belief, "are the roads slick?"

Martin Wallace was never allowed to marry Eleanor Hamilton, but he did write her term papers while at college. He even started to renovate an old barn for the two of them to live in once they received degrees, but Captain William Mackay married her and took her to Tulsa three weeks before graduation. Martin decided to hold onto his barn and finish it anyway. Eight years later Eleanor left her Captain and two daughters, and came to stay with Martin for short jaunts in between her travels. After the Captain's death she brought her daughters to visit with him awhile and eventually bought an old farm house five miles down the road.

Martin sits in a cushioned chair with his back to the sun and smiles at her huge knuckles and red fingernails. "Did you finish last weeks puzzle?"

"Oh yes, easily. I'm beginning to believe they're lowering their standards."

"Could be. Maybe you're just catching on to their methods. You're rather quick with those things."

"With what things?" Her cheeks dimple and Martin knows she's going to make him play the whole game.

"Figuring out the easiest way through or around things. Are you sure you don't have Mrs. Lander's son helping you with the clues?"

"You old fool, you know I do my own research."

Martin starts this game every week with her. Each week it's a new area, but she knows the final score before it begins. She throws out the opening pitch and he spends the rest of the afternoon trying to drive it home.

She puts her glasses back on and reaches for the puzzle. With her eyebrows raised and her chin tucked into her straightened neck, she glances down the list of hints.

"Oh, it may be a bit more challenging this week. But one can never tell without a pen and scratch paper."

In school Martin considered Eleanor sharp, and rather lazy. But he was so awestruck by her beauty and interest in the components of the hydrogen bomb that he practically completed the research for her chemistry paper the same evening she asked him for some assistance.

"Maybe we can figure it out faster if we do it together?" Martin's eyes are laughing with anticipation of the response he knows is to follow. Eleanor is certain to compliment his kindness in offering and hint that she didn't know he too enjoyed the challenge of a good vocabulary. But instead she folds the paper and places it in her lap.

"No, I'll take a better look at it later. It'll give me something to do." She massages her throat and reaches for the glass of water on her tray.

Martin pushes himself against the wooden arms of the chair and leans forward. "I almost forgot. Margaret wanted me to give you this. It's from little Peggy's birthday."

"I'm certain it's not a belated invitation to the party."

"She knows it's too long a trip for you Ellie."

"Malarky."

Martin fishes through a hugh brown bag from the Cellar at Macy's and pulls out a somewhat mashed piece of yellow cake, its dark icing smashed against the saran wrap.

"I don't like chocolate."

He pulls out a drawing of a girl with a birthday hat.

"Little Peggy specifically asked me to bring this to you. She misses you, Ellie."

He reaches into his breast pocket and pulls out an envelope of Kodak paper and hands it to her. She takes it and quickly shuffles

through the glossy exposures of celebration.

"She looks more like her father everyday."

Martin tries to remember the last time she's seen Peggy, or when Margaret ever bothered to invite her to a party for the child.

Eleanor gasped deeply.

"Well, I am certain Peggy was very satisfied with you there, spoiling her."

"I don't spoil her. I just bring twice as much as I should. Something from me and something from you."

"Honestly, Martin the child wouldn't know me if you forced Margaret to bring her here and place her on my lap." She took a deep breath and shook her head. "But Margaret would never come here on my account. Well, not unless you requested it."

Martin considers answering her but suggests a game of cards instead. Eleanor shakes her head. He shuffles though the deck.

"I'll even play one of your games El. Spit."

Eleanor was pouting. She knew Martin would never dispute her statement, even though she knows he loves Margaret. He would eagerly defend Margaret if he just wasn't so worried about the argument they both know would follow.

"Gin, then? I'll even give you a fair shot this time."

"I'd like a glass of gin, I'll tell you that."

She's asked for a drink. That tells Martin that she's feeling guilty again. At his 50th birthday party, Margaret told Martin the only tender thing Eleanor has ever done for Samantha and her was to allow them so much time with him. It may only have been the result of Eleanor needing Martin around the house for handy work or a bit of morale, but the more time he spent with them, the less time they were left alone with her.

Martin places little Peggy's birthday cake in the refrigerator and sits at the end of Eleanor's chaise, placing his old hand on the bump in her quilt he figures is her knee.

"How about some tea?"

Before she can accept Martin reaches for the nurse button behind Eleanor's head. She takes his hand, and holds it a moment.

"It's faster if you just make it yourself. There's some in my room. Ask one of the nurses for a kettle of hot water."

He brings her shrunken hand to his mouth and softly kisses it. She slaps his arm with the back of her other hand.

"Go, you old crow."

Martin walks down the bright corridor toward her wing. Many of the patients are up and about, more so than usual. Martin figures it's because of the sun and warm temperature. The pretty nurse who was with Eleanor earlier was coming out of her room with a tray of pills.

"Oh, Mr. Wallace, is Mrs. Mackay still in the sun room?"

Martin thought that question odd. Eleanor stayed in the sun room throughout visiting hours every Sunday. Except when her lungs forced her to remain in bed.

"Yes. Is something wrong?"

"No. She was just complaining of pains this morning. She had a bit of a set back last night. we put her on some pain killers. Doctor Micheals wants to monitor her for the next few days. Just to make sure her lungs are still strong enough to keep her breathing on her own."

"I was just going to make us some tea."

"Go ahead. I'll give her these, and we'll hook her back up when she's finished.

The nurse rolled the cart up the hall and Martin wished they would call him when she had these set backs. He could bring her something extra, like a new plant or the article in last month's *Atlantic Monthly* that reminded him about her brother John. At least he would know not to bring those things that remind her there's still a bridge to be mended.

Martin opens up the closet next to her television set and carefully searches for the canister of tea. He thinks the closet smells like an old lady; tea, jasmine, softly scented tissues and lilac bath balls. There is even a slightly musty smelling talc in a circular container with a big puff. He takes the tea and looks for some of the fresh mint he brought her last week.

Behind her box of potpourri he finds a large sliver frame. The photo in it is a bit yellowed and wrinkled, but very clear. It is of Martin with Margaret and Samantha at one of Eleanor's May Day celebrations. He has wrapped the girls up to the Maypole with all the ribbons, and is standing with a hand on each of their shoulders. The girls are laughing, hard. He never knew Eleanor had any pictures of him with the girls, let alone saved one for so long. He takes it and places it on Eleanor's bed side table. He closes the closet door, forgetting about the mint, and leaves her room.

There are three women with Eleanor when Martin returns. They're standing around her in a semi-circle. All are talking rather randomly and loud. Martin grins a bit because the women look silly. He wonders why people always talk louder and slower when someone is ill, as if all sickness affects one's hearing. He can tell without even seeing her face that Eleanor is bored with these rather fat ladies. Her head keeps looking beyond the one in the red circus tent to the snow melting off the awning.

"Ladies, how is everyone today?" Martin sees Eleanor's shoulders rise and fall with a sigh of freedom.

The ladies instantly direct their attention at him, asking many cocktail party questions. They are equally relieve that he has entered and diverted their efforts from entertaining Eleanor.

Martin offers them all a cup of tea, to which they decline, and directs the conversation back to Eleanor.

"Ellie tells me you're working on a lovely quilt for your latest grandchild, Mrs. Swinerton. I hear you've done a remarkable job."

The shortest one brings her knarled hand to her heart and gasps.

"Why Eleanor, I'll take that as the grandest compliment I could receive. You're such a seamstress, and for you to take such notice of my efforts, well, thank you very much."

The ladies are doting on her. Martin knows it. Eleanor knows it. They really don't even speak to one another on a regular basis. Eleanor claims they've been forgotten; they've been here too long. "They just won't die." She tells Martin this every week when they come in to infringe upon her novelty.

"Ladies, how about some bridge? I've been trying to get Ellie to play cards all afternoon."

Martin glances at Eleanor for some reaction. He figures she'll be shaking her head rapidly or running her forefinger back-and-forth of her neck. But she's staring through the sliding doors. Her shoulders are rising and falling iratically. Her swollen hands are clasped tightly on her neck.

The ladies flounder with reason for why they really can't stay. Martin acknowledges them with a broad grin and goes to Eleanor.

He sits on her side, too frightened to upset her with his own concern.

"How you feeling El?" He rubs her clenched hands.

She nods her head, swallows and slowly answers. "Fine."

After a minute her breathing gains some rhythm and she turns to Martin. Her eyes are glassy.

"I'm okay."

He smiles and offers her some water.

"I know."

Martin reaches for the book next to the vase of tulips. The sun is beginning to set on their petals. Their colors dance on the glass tray. The young nurse comes in with a chart and tells Eleanor its time to reattach herself. For a few hours, that's all. Eleanor ignores the nurse's voice but reaches for the tubing. The nurse checks her watch, writes down the time, switches on the machine and resets the pressure.

"I'll be back at 5:30, Mrs. Mackay, for dinner."

Martin hands her a book and she reaches for the bifocals resting in her cleavage. She can't raise them to her face because the tubing is in the way. She shuts her eyes tightly and lets her glasses drop to the end of her chain. Martin wishes he had noticed this earlier.

"Who is that nurse, Ellie? I've never seen her before."

He reaches across her and unhooks the chain from the ends of the her bifocals. His throat is thick.

"Don't tell me old Miss Ferry decided to retire on us."

He smooths her hair and hands the glasses to her. She takes them without looking at him and begins to read.

Martin sets up and pulls the paper from his bag. He returns to the chair opposite her and reads, frequently glancing up to watch her. His reading falls into pace with the inhale and exhale of the machine.

Martin checks his watch and folds the paper. The room is beginning to cool with the hour. Eleanor is asleep and breathing normally. He gathers his belongings and places them in the bag. He takes his book and places it on the table. The tulips have begun to fold.

He stands above her and rubs the feather on his hat. He dusts the top of her head with light kisses. Her eyes open suddenly and the hissing of the respirator quickens. He reaches into her lap lifts her hand to his lips. She slowly raises her still hand and squeezes the back of his wrist gently allowing her thumb to rub across his veins.

"Stay well. I'll see you next Sunday." And Martin leaves her to her breathing.

Mr. Martin Wallace takes his car home by means of the Parkway. The traffic is heavier but the smell of the air saltier. The radio has Billy Graham sanctifying those unable or unwilling to get to a house of worship, and Martin begins to hum bits of Gershwin. He figures that he's headed for the lagoon — there are piles of soaked sand on the edge of the road and the signs have speckled patterns of salt rot — but can't quite remember when he made this decision. Yet, he can easily remember the directions and before Billy has echoed a final Amen, Martin pulls his car along the curb and stares at the water more greyed by phosphates than winter.

For minutes Martin hears nothing except the yellowed foam at the water's hem suck at the shore, and he knows he no longer vests any powers in the senses of the sea. The ringing of phones on the gospel station lets Martin know that Billy Graham is now accepting confessions. He stares at the cracking sea grass and knows that the young pretty nurse is calling. She needs to tell him something the vibrant purples and yellows of the tulips on Eleanor's breakfast tray already radiated throughout the sun room.

Leigh Walton