

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Margaret Atwood



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The Handmaid's Tale

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The Handmaid's Tale



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And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.

– *Genesis, 30:1-3*

But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal ...

–*Jonathan Swift, A Modest Proposal*

In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones.

– *Sufi proverb*

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NIGHT

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini-skirts, then pants, then one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back or out back, in the parking lot, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh.

We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an afterthought, as we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had flannelette sheets like children's, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said u.s. We folded our clothes neatly and laid them on the stools at the ends of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on their backs from their leather belts.

No guns though, even they could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for the guards specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren't allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:

Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.

SHOPPING

A chair, a table, a lamp. Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the centre of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to.

A window, two white curtains. Under the window, a window seat with a little cushion. When the window is partly open – it only opens partly – the air can come in and make the curtains move. I can sit in the chair, or on the window seat, hands folded, and watch this. Sunlight comes in through the window too, and falls on the floor, which is made of wood, in narrow strips, highly polished. I can smell the polish. There's a rug on the floor, oval, of braided rags. This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not, want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?

On the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises, watercolour. Flowers are still allowed. Does each of us have the same print, the same chair, the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?

Think of it as being in the army, said Aunt Lydia.

A bed. Single, mattress medium-hard, covered with a flocked white spread. Nothing takes place in the bed but sleep; or no sleep. I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last. I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolour picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge.

So. Apart from these details, this could be a college guest room, for the less distinguished visitors; or a room in a rooming house, of former times, for ladies in reduced circumstances. That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances.

But a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight. Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or.

The bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries. As in a nunnery too, there are few mirrors.

I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight, in their red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, put them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that

extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. I never looked good in red, it's not my colour. I pick up the shopping basket, put it over my arm.

The door of the room – not *my* room, I refuse to say *my* – is not locked. In fact it doesn't shut properly. I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the centre, dusty pink. Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way.

The carpet bends and goes down the front staircase and I go with it, one hand on the banister, once a tree, turned in another century, rubbed to a warm gloss. Late Victorian, the house is, a family house, built for a large rich family. There's a grandfather clock in the hallway, which doles out time, and then the door to the motherly front sitting room, with its fleshtones and hints. A sitting room in which I never sit, but stand or kneel only. At the end of the hallway, above the front door, is a fanlight of coloured glass: flowers, red and blue.

There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, like a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood.

At the bottom of the stairs there's a hat-and-umbrella stand, the bentwood kind, long rounded rungs of wood curving gently up into hooks shaped like the opening fronds of a fern. There are several umbrellas in it: black, for the Commander, blue, for the Commander's Wife, and the one assigned to me, which is red. I leave the red umbrella where it is, because I know from the window that the day is sunny. I wonder whether or not the Commander's Wife is in the sitting room. She doesn't always sit. Sometimes I can hear her pacing back and forth, a heavy step and then a light one, and the soft tap of her cane on the dusty-rose carpet.

I walk along the hallway, past the sitting-room door and the door that leads into the dining room, and open the door at the end of the hall and go through into the kitchen. Here the smell is no longer of furniture polish. Rita is in here, standing at the kitchen table, which has a top of chipped white enamel. She's in her usual Martha's dress, which is dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before. The dress is much like mine in shape, long and concealing, but with a bib apron over it and without the white wings and the veil. She puts the veil on to go outside, but nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha. Her sleeves are rolled up to the elbow, showing her brown arms. She's making bread, throwing the loaves for the finishing brief kneading and then the shaping.

Rita sees me and nods, whether in greeting or in simple acknowledgement of my presence. It's hard to say, and wipes her floury hands on her apron and rummages in the kitchen drawers for the token book. Frowning, she tears out three tokens and hands them to me. Her face might be kindly if she would smile. But the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or another form of bad luck.

Sometimes I listen outside closed doors, a thing I never would have done in the time before. I don't listen long, because I don't want to be caught doing it. Once, though, I heard

Rita say to Cora that she wouldn't debase herself like that.

Nobody asking you, Cora said. Anyways, what could you do, supposing?

Go to the Colonies, Rita said. They have the choice.

With the Unwomen, and starve to death and Lord knows what all? said Cora. Catch you.

They were shelling peas; even through the almost-closed door I could hear the light clink of the hard peas falling into the metal bowl. I heard Rita, a grunt or a sigh, of protest or agreement.

Anyways, they're doing it for us all, said Cora, or so they say. If I hadn't of got my tub tied, it could of been me, say I was ten years younger. It's not that bad. It's not what you call hard work.

Better her than me, Rita said, and I opened the door. Their faces were the way women's faces are when they've been talking about you behind your back and they think you've heard, embarrassed, but also a little defiant, as if it were their right. That day, Cora was more pleasant to me than usual, Rita more surly.

Today, despite Rita's closed face and pressed lips, I would like to stay here, in the kitchen. Cora might come in, from somewhere else in the house, carrying her bottle of lemon oil and her duster, and Rita would make coffee – in the houses of the Commanders there is still real coffee – and we would sit at Rita's kitchen table, which is not Rita's any more than my table is mine, and we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signalling that yes, we know all about it. We would exchange remedies and try to outdo each other in the recital of our physical miseries. Gently we would complain, our voices soft and minor-key and mournful as pigeons in the eaves troughs. *I know what you mean*, we'd say. Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear still, from older people: *I hear where you're coming from*, as if the voice itself were a traveller arriving from a distant place. Which it would be, which it is.

How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts.

Or we would gossip. The Marthas know things, they talk among themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house. Like me, they listen at doors, no doubt, and see things even with their eyes averted. I've heard them at it sometimes, caught whiffs of their private conversations. *Stillborn, it was*. Or, *Stabbed her with a knitting needle, right in the belly*. *Jealous, it must have been, eating her up*. Or, tantalizingly, *It was toilet cleaner she used. Worked like charm, though you'd think he'd of tasted it. Must've been that drunk; but they found her out, right*.

Or I would help Rita to make the bread, sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch.

But even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid. The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us.

Fraternize means to *behave like a brother*. Luke told me that. He said there was no

corresponding word that meant *to behave like a sister*. *Sororize*, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. He liked knowing about such details. The derivations of words, curious usages. I used to tease him about being pedantic.

I take the tokens from Rita's outstretched hand. They have pictures on them, of the things they can be exchanged for: twelve eggs, a piece of cheese, a brown thing that's supposed to be a steak. I place them in the zippered pocket in my sleeve, where I keep my pass.

"Tell them fresh, for the eggs," she says. "Not like the last time. And a chicken, tell them it's not a hen. Tell them who it's for and then they won't mess around."

"All right," I say. I don't smile. Why tempt her to friendship?

I go out by the back door, into the garden, which is large and tidy: a lawn in the middle, willow, weeping catkins; around the edges, the flower borders, in which the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out colour. The tulips are red, darker crimson towards the stem, as if they had been cut and are beginning to heal there.

This garden is the domain of the Commander's Wife. Looking out through my shattered window I've often seen her in it, her knees on a cushion, a light blue veil thrown over her wide gardening hat, a basket at her side with shears in it and pieces of string for tying the flowers into place. A Guardian detailed to the Commander does the heavy digging; the Commander's Wife directs, pointing with her stick. Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for.

I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers. Time could pass more swiftly that way. Sometimes the Commander's Wife has a chair brought out, and just sits in it, in her garden. From a distance it looks like peace.

She isn't here now, and I start to wonder where she is: I don't like to come upon the Commander's Wife unexpectedly. Perhaps she's sewing, in the sitting room, with her left foot on the footstool, because of her arthritis. Or knitting scarves, for the Angels at the front line. I can hardly believe the Angels have a need for such scarves; anyway, the ones made by the Commander's Wife are too elaborate. She doesn't bother with the cross-and-star pattern used by many of the other Wives, it's not a challenge. Fir trees march along the ends of her scarves, or eagles, or stiff humanoid figures, boy and girl, boy and girl. They aren't scarves for grown men but for children.

Sometimes I think these scarves aren't sent to the Angels at all, but unravelled and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted again in their turn. Maybe it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose. But I envy the Commander's Wife her knitting. It's good to have small goals that can be easily attained.

What does she envy me?

She doesn't speak to me, unless she can't avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity.

We stood face to face for the first time five weeks ago, when I arrived at this posting. The Guardian from the previous posting brought me to the front door. On first days we are permitted front doors, but after that we're supposed to use the back. Things haven't settled down, it's too soon, everyone is unsure about our exact status. After a while it will be either all front doors or all back.

Aunt Lydia said she was lobbying for the front. Yours is a position of honour, she said.

The Guardian rang the doorbell for me, but before there was time for someone to hear and walk quickly to answer, the door opened inwards. She must have been waiting behind it.

was expecting a Martha, but it was her instead, in her long powder-blue robe, unmistakable

So, you're the new one, she said. She didn't step aside to let me in, she just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so. There is push and shove, these days, over such toeholds.

Yes, I said.

Leave it on the porch. She said this to the Guardian, who was carrying my bag. The bag was red vinyl and not large. There was another bag, with the winter cloak and heavy dresses, but that would be coming later.

The Guardian set down the bag and saluted her. Then I could hear his footsteps behind me going back down the walk, and the click of the front gate, and I felt as if a protective arm were being withdrawn. The threshold of a new house is a lonely place.

She waited until the car started up and pulled away. I wasn't looking at her face, but at the part of her I could see with my head lowered: her blue waist, thickened, her left hand on the ivory head of her cane, the large diamonds on the ring finger, which must once have been fine and was still finely kept, the fingernail at the end of the knuckle finger filed to a gentle curving point. It was like an ironic smile, on that finger; like something mocking her.

You might as well come in, she said. She turned her back on me and limped down the hall. Shut the door behind you.

I lifted the red bag inside, as she'd no doubt intended, then closed the door. I didn't say anything to her. Aunt Lydia said it was best not to speak unless they asked you a direct question. Try to think of it from their point of view, she said, her hands clasped and wrung together, her nervous pleading smile. It isn't easy for them.

In here, said the Commander's Wife. When I went into the sitting room she was already in her chair, her left foot on the footstool, with its petit-point cushion, roses in a basket. Her knitting was on the floor beside the chair, the needles stuck through it.

I stood in front of her, hands folded. So, she said. She had a cigarette, and she put it between her lips and gripped it there while she lit it. Her lips were thin, held that way, with the small vertical lines around them you used to see in advertisements for lip cosmetics. The lighter was ivory-coloured. The cigarettes must have come from the black market, I thought, and this gave me hope. Even now that there is no real money any more, there's still a black market. There's always a black market, there's always something that can be exchanged. She then was a woman who might bend the rules. But what did I have, to trade?

I looked at the cigarette with longing. For me, like liquor and coffee, cigarettes are forbidden.

So old what's-his-face didn't work out, she said.

No, Ma'am, I said.

She gave what might have been a laugh, then coughed. Tough luck on him, she said. This is your second, isn't it?

Third, Ma'am, I said.

Not so good for you either, she said. There was another coughing laugh. You can sit down. I don't make a practice of it, but just this time.

I did sit, on the edge of one of the stiff-backed chairs. I didn't want to stare around the room, I didn't want to appear inattentive to her; so the marble mantelpiece to my right and the mirror over it and the bunches of flowers were just shadows, then, at the edges of my eyes. Later I would have more than enough time to take them in.

Now her face was on a level with mine. I thought I recognized her; or at least there was something familiar about her. A little of her hair was showing, from under her veil. It was still blonde. I thought then that maybe she bleached it, that hair dye was something else she could get through the black market, but I know now that it really is blonde. Her eyebrows were plucked into thin arched lines, which gave her a permanent look of surprise, or outrage or inquisitiveness, such as you might see on a startled child, but below them her eyelids were tired-looking. Not so her eyes, which were the flat hostile blue of a midsummer sky in bright sunlight, a blue that shuts you out. Her nose must once have been what was called cute but now was too small for her face. Her face was not fat but it was large. Two lines led downwards from the corners of her mouth; between them was her chin, clenched like a fist.

I want to see as little of you as possible, she said. I expect you feel the same way about me.

I didn't answer, as a yes would have been insulting, a no contradictory.

I know you aren't stupid, she went on. She inhaled, blew out the smoke. I've read your file. As far as I'm concerned, this is like a business transaction. But if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back. You understand?

Yes, Ma'am, I said.

Don't call me Ma'am, she said irritably. You're not a Martha.

I didn't ask what I was supposed to call her, because I could see that she hoped I would never have the occasion to call her anything at all. I was disappointed. I wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me. The Wife in my posting before this had spent most of her time in her bedroom; the Martha said she drank. I wanted this one to be different. I wanted to think I would have liked her, at another time and place, another life. But I could see already that I wouldn't have liked her, nor she me.

She put her cigarette out, half-smoked, in a little scrolled ashtray on the lamp table beside her. She did this decisively, one jab and one grind, not the series of genteel taps favoured by many of the Wives.

As for my husband, she said, he's just that. My husband. I want that to be perfectly clear. Till death do us part. It's final.

Yes, Ma'am, I said again, forgetting. They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotonous voice of a doll. She probably longed to slap my face. They can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands.

It's one of the things we fought for, said the Commander's Wife, and suddenly she wasn't looking at me, she was looking down at her knuckled, diamond-studded hands, and I knew where I'd seen her before.

The first time was on television, when I was eight or nine. It was when my mother was

sleeping in, on Sunday mornings, and I would get up early and go to the television set in my mother's study and flip through the channels, looking for cartoons. Sometimes when I couldn't find any I would watch the Growing Souls Gospel Hour, where they would tell Bible stories for children and sing hymns. One of the women was called Serena Joy. She was the lead soprano. She was ash-blonde, petite, with a snub nose and huge blue eyes which she would turn upwards during hymns. She could smile and cry at the same time, one tear or two sliding gracefully down her cheek, as if on cue, as her voice lifted through its highest notes, tremulous, effortless. It was after that she went on to other things.

The woman sitting in front of me was Serena Joy. Or had been, once. So it was worse than I thought.

CHAPTER FOUR

I walk along the gravel path that divides the back lawn, neatly, like a hair parting. It has rained during the night; the grass to either side is damp, the air humid. Here and there are worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil, caught by the sun, half dead; flexible and pin-like lips.

I open the white picket gate and continue, past the front lawn and towards the front gate. In the driveway, one of the Guardians assigned to our household is washing the car. This must mean the Commander is in the house, in his own quarters, past the dining room and beyond, where he seems to stay most of the time.

The car is a very expensive one, a Whirlwind; better than the Chariot, much better than the chunky, practical Behemoth. It's black, of course, the colour of prestige or a hearse, and long and sleek. The driver is going over it with a chamois, lovingly. This at least hasn't changed the way men caress good cars.

He's wearing the uniform of the Guardians, but his cap is tilted at a jaunty angle and his sleeves are rolled to the elbow, showing his forearms, tanned but with a stipple of dark hair. He has a cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth, which shows that he too has something he can trade on the black market.

I know this man's name: *Nick*. I know this because I've heard Rita and Cora talking about him, and once I heard the Commander speaking to him: Nick, I won't be needing the car.

He lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn't been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn't rate: some defect, lack of connections. But he acts as if he doesn't know this, or care. He's too casual, he's not servile enough. It may be stupidity, but I don't think so. Smells fishy, they used to say; or, I smell a rat. Misfit as odour. Despite myself, I think of how he might smell. Not fish or decaying rat: tanned skin, moist in the sun, filmed with smoke. I sigh, inhaling.

He looks at me, and sees me looking. He has a French face, lean, whimsical, all planes and angles, with creases around the mouth where he smiles. He takes a final puff of the cigarette, lets it drop to the driveway, and steps on it. He begins to whistle. Then he winks.

I drop my head and turn so that the white wings hide my face, and keep walking. He's just taken a risk, but for what? What if I were to report him?

Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps he saw the look on my face and mistook it for something else. Really what I wanted was the cigarette.

Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do.

Perhaps he is an Eye.

I open the front gate and close it behind me, looking down but not back. The sidewalk is red brick. That is the landscape I focus on, a field of oblongs, gently undulating where the earth

beneath has buckled, from decade after decade of winter frost. The colour of the bricks is still yet fresh and clear. Sidewalks are kept much cleaner than they used to be.

I walk to the corner and wait. I used to be bad at waiting. They also serve who only stand and wait, said Aunt Lydia. She made us memorize it. She also said, Not all of you will make through. Some of you will fall on dry ground or thorns. Some of you are shallow-rooted. She had a mole on her chin that went up and down while she talked. She said, Think of yourselves as seeds, and right then her voice was wheedling, conspiratorial, like the voices of those women who used to teach ballet classes to children, and who would say, Arms up in the air now; let's pretend we're trees.

I stand on the corner, pretending I am a tree.

A shape, red with white wings around the face, a shape like mine, a nondescript woman in red carrying a basket, comes along the brick sidewalk towards me. She reaches me and we peer at each other's faces looking down the white tunnels of cloth that enclose us. She is the right one.

"Blessed be the fruit," she says to me, the accepted greeting among us.

"May the Lord open," I answer, the accepted response. We turn and walk together past the large houses, towards the central part of town. We aren't allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable.

This woman has been my partner for two weeks. I don't know what happened to the one before. On a certain day she simply wasn't there any more, and this one was there in her place. It isn't the sort of thing you ask questions about, because the answers are not usually the answers you want to know. Anyway there wouldn't be an answer.

This one is a little plumper than I am. Her eyes are brown. Her name is Ofglen, and that's about all I know about her. She walks demurely, head down, red-gloved hands clasped in front, with short little steps like a trained pig's on its hind legs. During these walks she has never said anything that was not strictly orthodox, but then, neither have I. She may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. I can't take the risk.

"The war is going well, I hear," she says.

"Praise be," I reply.

"We've been sent good weather."

"Which I receive with joy."

"They've defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday."

"Praise be," I say. I don't ask her how she knows. "What were they?"

"Baptists. They had a stronghold in the Blue Hills. They smoked them out."

"Praise be."

Sometimes I wish she would just shut up and let me walk in peace. But I'm ravenous for news, any kind of news; even if it's false news, it must mean something.

We reached the first barrier, which is like the barriers blocking off roadworks, or dug-up sewers: a wooden crisscross painted in yellow and black stripes, a red hexagon which means Stop. Near the gateway there are some lanterns, not lit because it isn't night. Above us, I know, there are floodlights, attached to the telephone poles, for use in emergencies, and there are men with machine guns in the pillboxes on either side of the road. I don't see the floodlights and the pillboxes, because of the wings around my face. I just know they are there.

Behind the barrier, waiting for us at the narrow gateway, there are two men, in the green uniforms of the Guardians of the Faith, with the crests on their shoulders and berets: two swords, crossed, above a white triangle. The Guardians aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young, apart from the ones that are Eyes incognito.

These two are very young: one moustache is still sparse, one face is still blotchy. Their youth is touching, but I know I can't be deceived by it. The young ones are often the most dangerous, the most fanatical, the jumpiest with their guns. They haven't yet learned about existence through time. You have to go slowly with them.

Last week they shot a woman, right about here. She was a Martha. She was fumbling in her robe, for her pass, and they thought she was hunting for a bomb. They thought she was a man in disguise. There have been such incidents.

Rita and Cora knew the woman. I heard them talking about it, in the kitchen.

Doing their job, said Cora. Keeping us safe.

Nothing safer than dead, said Rita, angrily. She was minding her own business. No call to shoot her.

It was an accident, said Cora.

No such thing, said Rita. Everything is meant. I could hear her thumping the pots around in the sink.

Well, someone'll think twice before blowing up this house, anyways, said Cora.

All the same, said Rita. She worked hard. That was a bad death.

I can think of worse, said Cora. At least it was quick.

You can say that, said Rita. I'd choose to have some time, before, like. To set things right.

The two young Guardians salute us, raising three fingers to the rims of their berets. Such tokens are accorded to us. They are supposed to show respect, because of the nature of our service.

We produce our passes, from the zippered pockets in our wide sleeves, and they are inspected and stamped. One man goes into the right-hand pillbox, to punch our numbers into the Compuchek.

In returning my pass, the one with the peach-coloured moustache bends his head to try to get a look at my face. I raise my head a little, to help him, and he sees my eyes and I see his

and he blushes. His face is long and mournful, like a sheep's, but with the large full eyes of a dog, spaniel not terrier. His skin is pale and looks unwholesomely tender, like the skin under a scab. Nevertheless, I think of placing my hand on it, this exposed face. He is the one who turns away.

It's an event, a small defiance of rule, so small as to be undetectable, but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself, like the candy I hoarded, as a child, at the back of a drawer. Such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes.

What if I were to come at night, when he's on duty alone – though he would never be allowed such solitude – and permit him beyond my white wings? What if I were to peel off my red shroud and show myself to him, to them, by the uncertain light of the lanterns? That is what they must think about sometimes, as they stand endlessly beside this barrier, past which nobody ever comes except the Commanders of the Faithful in their long black murmurous cars, or their blue Wives and white-veiled daughters on their dutiful way to Salvagings or Prayvaganzas, or their dumpy green Marthas, or the occasional Birthmobile, or their red Handmaids, on foot. Or sometimes a black-painted van, with the winged eye of white on the side. The windows of the vans are dark-tinted, and the men in the front seats wear dark glasses: a double obscurity.

The vans are surely more silent than the other cars. When they pass, we avert our eyes. When there are sounds coming from inside, we try not to hear them. Nobody's heart is perfect.

When the black vans reach a checkpoint, they're waved through without a pause. The Guardians would not want to take the risk of looking inside, searching, doubting the authority. Whatever they think.

If they do think; you can't tell by looking at them.

But more likely they don't think in terms of clothing discarded on the lawn. If they think of a kiss, they must then think immediately of the floodlights going on, the rifle shots. They think instead of doing their duty and of promotion to the Angels, and of being allowed possibly to marry, and then, if they are able to gain enough power and live to be old enough to be of being allotted a Handmaid of their own.

The one with the moustache opens the small pedestrian gate for us and stands back, well off to the side of the way, and we pass through. As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young.

Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but present there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from the two men who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes.

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