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First Anchor Books Edition, April 1998

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The author would like to thank the D.A.A.D. in West Berlin and the English department at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, for providing time and space.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Atwood, Margaret Eleanor, 1939-

The handmaid's tale / Margaret Atwood. -- 1st Anchor Books ed.  
p. cm.

1. Man-woman relationships--Fiction. 2. Misogyny--Fiction.  
3. Women--Fiction. I. Title.

PR9199.3.A8113 1998

813'.54--dc21

97-42966

CIP

ISBN 0-385-49081-X

[www.anchorbooks.com](http://www.anchorbooks.com)

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
70 69 68 67

# *The Handmaid's Tale*

## *Margaret Atwood*



ANCHOR BOOKS

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NEW YORK

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## *Waiting Room*

8

The good weather holds. It's almost like June, when we would get out our sundresses and our sandals and go for an ice cream cone. There are three new bodies on the Wall. One is a priest, still wearing the black cassock. That's been put on him, for the trial, even though they gave up wearing those years ago, when the sect wars first began; cassocks made them too conspicuous. The two others have purple placards hung around their necks: Gender Treachery. Their bodies still wear the Guardian uniforms. Caught together, they must have been, but where? A barracks, a shower? It's hard to say. The snowman with the red smile is gone.

"We should go back," I say to Ofglen. I'm always the one to say this. Sometimes I feel that if I didn't say it, she would stay here forever. But is she mourning or gloating? I still can't tell.

Without a word she swivels, as if she's voice-activated, as if she's on little oiled wheels, as if she's on top of a music box. I resent this grace of hers. I resent her meek head, bowed as if into a heavy wind. But there is no wind.

We leave the Wall, walk back the way we came, in the warm sun.

"It's a beautiful May day," Ofglen says. I feel rather than see her head turn towards me, waiting for a reply.

"Yes," I say. "Praise be," I add as an afterthought. *Mayday* used to be a distress signal, a long time ago, in one of those wars we studied in high school. I kept getting them mixed up, but you could tell them apart by the airplanes if you paid attention. It was Luke who told me about mayday, though. *Mayday, mayday*, for pilots whose planes had been hit, and ships — was it ships too? — at sea. Maybe it was S O S for ships. I wish I could look it up. And it was something from Beethoven, for the beginning of the victory, in one of those wars.

Do you know what it came from? said Luke. Mayday?

No, I said. It's a strange word to use for that, isn't it?

Newspapers and coffee, on Sunday mornings, before she was born. There were still newspapers, then. We used to read them in bed.

It's French, he said. From *m'aidez*.

Help me.

Coming towards us there's a small procession, a funeral: three women, each with a black transparent veil thrown over her head-dress. An Econowife and two others, the mourners, also Econowives, her friends perhaps. Their striped dresses are worn-looking, as are their faces. Some day, when times improve, says Aunt Lydia, no one will have to be an Econowife.

The first one is the bereaved, the mother; she carries a small black jar. From the size of the jar you can tell how old it was when it foundered, inside her, flowed to its death. Two or three months, too young to tell whether or not it was an Unbaby. The older ones and those that die at birth have boxes.

We pause, out of respect, while they go by. I wonder if Ofglen feels what I do, pain like a stab, in the belly. We put our hands over our hearts to show these stranger women that we feel with them in their loss. Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Econowives do not like us.

We go past the shops and come to the barrier again, and are passed through. We continue on among the large empty-looking houses, the weedless lawns. At the corner near the house where I'm posted, Ofglen stops, turns to me.

"Under His Eye," she says. The right farewell.

"Under His Eye," I reply, and she gives a little nod. She hesitates, as if to say something more, but then she turns away and walks down the street. I watch her. She's like my own reflection, in a mirror from which I am moving away.

In the driveway, Nick is polishing the Whirlwind again. He's reached the chrome at the back. I put my gloved hand on the latch of the gate, open it, push inward. The gate clicks behind me. The tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards.

Nick looks up and begins to whistle. Then he says, "Nice walk?"

I nod, but do not answer with my voice. He isn't supposed to speak to me. Of course some of them will try, said Aunt Lydia. All flesh is weak. All flesh is grass, I corrected her in my head. They can't help it, she said, God made them that way but He did not make you that way. He made you different. It's up to you to set the boundaries. Later you will be thanked.

In the garden behind the house the Commander's Wife is sitting, in the chair she's had brought out. Serena Joy, what a stupid name. It's like something you'd put on your hair, in the other time, the time before, to straighten it. *Serena Joy*, it would say on the bottle, with a woman's head in cut-paper silhouette on a pink oval background with scalloped gold edges. With everything to choose from in the way of names, why did she pick that one? Serena Joy was never her real name, not even then. Her real name was Pam. I read that in a profile on her, in a news magazine, long after I'd first watched her singing while my mother slept in on Sunday mornings. By that time she was worthy of a profile: *Time* or *Newsweek* it was, it must have been. She wasn't singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all.

Around that time, someone tried to shoot her and missed; her secretary, who was standing right behind her, was killed instead. Someone else planted a bomb in her car but it went off too early.

Though some people said she'd put the bomb in her own car, for sympathy. That's how hot things were getting.

Luke and I would watch her sometimes on the late-night news. Bathrobes, nightcaps. We'd watch her sprayed hair and her hysteria, and the tears she could still produce at will, and the mascara blackening her cheeks. By that time she was wearing more make-up. We thought she was funny. Or Luke thought she was funny. I only pretended to think so. Really she was a little frightening. She was in earnest.

She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word.

She's looking at the tulips. Her cane is beside her, on the grass. Her profile is towards me, I can see that in the quick sideways look I take at her as I go past. It wouldn't do to stare. It's no longer a flawless cut-paper profile, her face is sinking in upon itself, and I think of those towns built on underground rivers, where houses and whole streets disappear overnight, into sudden quagmires, or coal towns collapsing into the mines beneath them. Something like this must have happened to her, once she saw the true shape of things to come.

She doesn't turn her head. She doesn't acknowledge my presence in any way, although she knows I'm there. I can tell she knows, it's like a smell, her knowledge; something gone sour, like old milk.

It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them. Aunt Lydia thought she was very good at feeling for other people. Try to pity them. Forgive them, for they know not what they do. Again the tremulous smile, of a beggar, the weak-eyed blinking, the gaze upwards, through the round steel-rimmed glasses, towards the back of the classroom, as if the green-painted plaster ceiling were opening and God on a cloud of Pink Pearl face powder were coming down through the wires and sprinkler plumbing. You must realize that they are defeated women. They have been unable —

Here her voice broke off, and there was a pause, during which I could hear a sigh, a collective sigh from those around me. It was a

bad idea to rustle or fidget during these pauses: Aunt Lydia might look abstracted but she was aware of every twitch. So there was only the sigh.

The future is in your hands, she resumed. She held her own hands out to us, the ancient gesture that was both an offering and an invitation, to come forward, into an embrace, an acceptance. In your hands, she said, looking down at her own hands as if they had given her the idea. But there was nothing in them. They were empty. It was our hands that were supposed to be full, of the future; which could be held but not seen.

I walk around to the back door, open it, go in, set my basket down on the kitchen table. The table has been scrubbed off, cleared of flour; today's bread, freshly baked, is cooling on its rack. The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother.

This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out.

Rita is there, sitting at the table, peeling and slicing carrots. Old carrots they are, thick ones, overwintered, bearded from their time in storage. The new carrots, tender and pale, won't be ready for weeks. The knife she uses is sharp and bright, and tempting. I would like to have a knife like that.

Rita stops chopping the carrots, stands up, takes the parcels out of the basket, almost eagerly. She looks forward to seeing what I've brought, although she always frowns while opening the parcels; nothing I bring fully pleases her. She's thinking she could have done better herself. She would rather do the shopping, get exactly what she wants; she envies me the walk. In this house we all envy each other something.

"They've got oranges," I say. "At Milk and Honey. There are still some left." I hold out this idea to her like an offering. I wish to ingratiate myself. I saw the oranges yesterday, but I didn't tell Rita; yesterday she was too grumpy. "I could get some tomorrow, if you'd give me the tokens for them." I hold out the chicken to her. She wanted steak today, but there wasn't any.

Rita grunts, not revealing pleasure or acceptance. She'll think

about it, the grunt says, in her own sweet time. She undoes the string on the chicken, and the glazed paper. She prods the chicken, flexes a wing, pokes a finger into the cavity, fishes out the giblets. The chicken lies there, headless and without feet, goose pimpled as though shivering.

"Bath day," Rita says, without looking at me.

Cora comes into the kitchen, from the pantry at the back, where they keep the mops and brooms. "A chicken," she says, almost with delight.

"Scrawny," says Rita, "but it'll have to do."

"There wasn't much else," I say. Rita ignores me.

"Looks big enough to me," says Cora. Is she standing up for me? I look at her, to see if I should smile; but no, it's only the food she's thinking of. She's younger than Rita; the sunlight, coming slant now through the west window, catches her hair, parted and drawn back. She must have been pretty, quite recently. There's a little mark, like a dimple, in each of her ears, where the punctures for earrings have grown over.

"Tall," says Rita, "but bony. You should speak up," she says to me, looking directly at me for the first time. "Ain't like you're common." She means the Commander's rank. But in the other sense, her sense, she thinks I am common. She is over sixty, her mind's made up.

She goes to the sink, runs her hands briefly under the tap, dries them on the dishtowel. The dishtowel is white with blue stripes. Dishtowels are the same as they always were. Sometimes these flashes of normality come at me from the side, like ambushes. The ordinary, the usual, a reminder, like a kick. I see the dishtowel, out of context, and I catch my breath. For some, in some ways, things haven't changed that much.

"Who's doing the bath?" says Rita, to Cora, not to me. "I got to tenderize this bird."

"I'll do it later," says Cora, "after the dusting."

"Just so it gets done," says Rita.

They're talking about me as though I can't hear. To them I'm a household chore, one among many.

I've been dismissed. I pick up the basket, go through the kitchen door and along the hall towards the grandfather clock. The sitting

room door is closed. Sun comes through the fanlight, falling in colors across the floor: red and blue, purple. I step into it briefly, stretch out my hands; they fill with flowers of light. I go up the stairs, my face, distant and white and distorted, framed in the hall mirror, which bulges outward like an eye under pressure. I follow the dusty-pink runner down the long upstairs hallway, back to the room.

There's someone standing in the hall, near the door to the room where I stay. The hall is dusky, this is a man, his back to me; he's looking into the room, dark against its light. I can see now, it's the Commander, he isn't supposed to be here. He hears me coming, turns, hesitates, walks forward. Towards me. He is violating custom, what do I do now?

I stop, he pauses, I can't see his face, he's looking at me, what does he want? But then he moves forward again, steps to the side to avoid touching me, inclines his head, is gone.

Something has been shown to me, but what is it? Like the flag of an unknown country, seen for an instant above a curve of hill. It could mean attack, it could mean parley, it could mean the edge of something, a territory. The signals animals give one another: lowered blue eyelids, ears laid back, raised hackles. A flash of bared teeth, what in hell does he think he's doing? Nobody else has seen him. I hope. Was he invading? Was he in my room?

I called it *mine*.

*M*y room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time.

I'm waiting, in my room, which right now is a waiting room. When I go to bed it's a bedroom. The curtains are still wavering in the small wind, the sun outside is still shining, though not in through the window directly. It has moved west. I am trying not to tell stories, or at any rate not this one.

Someone has lived in this room, before me. Someone like me, or I prefer to believe so.

I discovered it three days after I was moved here.

I had a lot of time to pass. I decided to explore the room. Not hastily, as one would explore a hotel room, expecting no surprise, opening and shutting the desk drawers, the cupboard doors, unwrapping the tiny individually wrapped bar of soap, prodding the pillows. Will I ever be in a hotel room again? How I wasted them, those rooms, that freedom from being seen.

Rented license.

In the afternoons, when Luke was still in flight from his wife, when I was still imaginary for him. Before we were married and I solidified. I would always get there first, check in. It wasn't that

many times, but it seems now like a decade, an era; I can remember what I wore, each blouse, each scarf. I would pace, waiting for him, turn the television on and then off, dab behind my ears with perfume, Opium it was. It was in a Chinese bottle, red and gold.

I was nervous. How was I to know he loved me? It might be just an affair. Why did we ever say *just*? Though at that time men and women tried each other on, casually, like suits, rejecting whatever did not fit.

The knock would come at the door; I'd open, with relief, desire. He was so momentary, so condensed. And yet there seemed no end to him. We would lie in those afternoon beds, afterwards, hands on each other, talking it over. Possible, impossible. What could be done? We thought we had such problems. How were we to know we were happy?

But now it's the rooms themselves I miss as well, even the dreadful paintings that hung on the walls, landscapes with fall foliage or snow melting in hardwoods, or women in period costume, with china-doll faces and bustles and parasols, or sad-eyed clowns, or bowls of fruit, stiff and chalky looking. The fresh towels ready for spoilage, the wastebaskets gaping their invitations, beckoning in the careless junk. Careless. I was careless, in those rooms. I could lift the telephone and food would appear on a tray, food I had chosen. Food that was bad for me, no doubt, and drink too. There were Bibles in the dresser drawers, put there by some charitable society, though probably no one read them very much. There were postcards, too, with pictures of the hotel on them, and you could write on the postcards and send them to anyone you wanted. It seems like such an impossible thing, now; like something you'd make up.

So. I explored this room, not hastily, then, like a hotel room, wasting it. I didn't want to do it all at once, I wanted to make it last. I divided the room into sections, in my head; I allowed myself one section a day. This one section I would examine with the greatest minuteness: the unevenness of the plaster under the wallpaper, the scratches in the paint of the baseboard and the windowsill, under the top coat of paint, the stains on the mattress, for I went so far as to lift the blankets and sheets from the bed, fold them back, a little at a time, so they could be replaced quickly if anyone came.

The stains on the mattress. Like dried flower petals. Not recent. Old love; there's no other kind of love in this room now.

When I saw that, the evidence left by two people, of love or something like it, desire at least, at least touch, between two people now perhaps old or dead, I covered the bed again and lay down on it. I looked up at the blind plaster eye in the ceiling. I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me. I have them, these attacks of the past, like faintness, a wave sweeping over my head. Sometimes it can hardly be borne. What is to be done, what is to be done, I thought. There is nothing to be done. They also serve who only stand and wait. Or lie down and wait. I know why the glass in the window is shatterproof, and why they took down the chandelier. I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me, but there wasn't room.

I saved the cupboard until the third day. I looked carefully over the door first, inside and out, then the walls with their brass hooks — how could they have overlooked the hooks? Why didn't they remove them? Too close to the floor? But still, a stocking, that's all you'd need. And the rod with the plastic hangers, my dresses hanging on them, the red woollen cape for cold weather, the shawl. I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, in the corner where the darkest shadow fell: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*.

I didn't know what it meant, or even what language it was in. I thought it might be Latin, but I didn't know any Latin. Still, it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended. It was intended for whoever came next.

It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman. For she is unknown; or if known, she has never been mentioned to me. It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy. When I imagine the woman who wrote them, I think of her as about my age, maybe a little younger. I turn her into Moira, Moira as she was when she was in college, in the room

next to mine: quirky, jaunty, athletic, with a bicycle once, and a knapsack for hiking. Freckles, I think; irreverent, resourceful.

I wonder who she was or is, and what's become of her.

I tried that out on Rita, the day I found the message.

Who was the woman who stayed in that room? I said. Before me? If I'd asked it differently, if I'd said, Was there a woman who stayed in that room before me? I might not have got anywhere.

Which one? she said; she sounded grudging, suspicious, but then, she almost always sounds like that when she speaks to me.

So there have been more than one. Some haven't stayed their full term of posting, their full two years. Some have been sent away, for one reason or another. Or maybe not sent; gone?

The lively one. I was guessing. The one with freckles.

You know her? Rita asked, more suspicious than ever.

I knew her before, I lied. I heard she was here.

Rita accepted this. She knows there must be a grapevine, an underground of sorts.

She didn't work out, she said.

In what way? I asked, trying to sound as neutral as possible.

But Rita clamped her lips together. I am like a child here, there are some things I must not be told. What you don't know won't hurt you, was all she would say.

Sometimes I sing to myself, in my head; something lugubrious, mournful, presbyterian:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
Could save a wretch like me,  
Who once was lost, but now am found,  
Was bound, but now am free.*

I don't know if the words are right. I can't remember. Such songs are not sung anymore in public, especially the ones that use words like *free*. They are considered too dangerous. They belong to outlawed sects.

*I feel so lonely, baby,  
I feel so lonely, baby,  
I feel so lonely I could die.*

This too is outlawed. I know it from an old cassette tape of my mother's; she had a scratchy and untrustworthy machine, too, that could still play such things. She used to put the tape on when her friends came over and they'd had a few drinks.

I don't sing like this often. It makes my throat hurt. There isn't much music in this house, except what we hear on

the TV. Sometimes Rita will hum, while kneading or peeling: a wordless humming, tuneless, unfathomable. And sometimes from the front sitting room there will be the thin sound of Serena's voice, from a disc made long ago and played now with the volume low, so she won't be caught listening as she sits in there knitting, remembering her own former and now amputated glory: *Hallelujah*.

It's warm for this time of year. Houses like this heat up in the sun, there's not enough insulation. Around me the air is stagnant, despite the little current, the breath coming in past the curtains. I'd like to be able to open the window as wide as it could go. Soon we'll be allowed to change into the summer dresses.

The summer dresses are unpacked and hanging in the closet, two of them, pure cotton, which is better than synthetics like the cheaper ones, though even so, when it's muggy, in July and August, you sweat inside them. No worry about sunburn though, said Aunt Lydia. The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. *Things*, the word she used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips. A successful life for her was one that avoided *things*, excluded *things*. Such *things* do not happen to nice women. And not good for the complexion, not at all, wrinkle you up like a dried apple. But we weren't supposed to care about our complexions anymore, she'd forgotten that.

In the park, said Aunt Lydia, lying on blankets, men and women together sometimes, and at that she began to cry, standing up there in front of us, in full view.

I'm doing my best, she said. I'm trying to give you the best chance you can have. She blinked, the light was too strong for her, her mouth trembled, around her front teeth, teeth that stuck out a little and were long and yellowish, and I thought about the dead mice we would find on the doorstep, when we lived in a house, all three of us, four counting our cat, who was the one making these offerings.

Aunt Lydia pressed her hand over her mouth of a dead rodent. After a minute she took her hand away. I wanted to cry too because



she reminded me. If only she wouldn't eat half of them first, I said to Luke.

Don't think it's easy for me either, said Aunt Lydia.

Moira, breezing into my room, dropping her denim jacket on the floor. Got any cigs, she said.

In my purse, I said. No matches though.

Moira rummages in my purse. You should throw out some of this junk, she says. I'm giving an underwhore party.

A what? I say. There's no point trying to work, Moira won't allow it, she's like a cat that crawls onto the page when you're trying to read.

You know, like Tupperware, only with underwear. Tarts' stuff. Lace crotches, snap garters. Bras that push your tits up. She finds my lighter, lights the cigarette she's extracted from my purse. Want one? Tosses the package, with great generosity, considering they're mine.

Thanks piles, I say sourly. You're crazy. Where'd you get an idea like that?

Working my way through college, says Moira. I've got connections. Friends of my mother's. It's big in the suburbs, once they start getting age spots they figure they've got to beat the competition. The Pornomarts and what have you.

I'm laughing. She always made me laugh.

But here? I say. Who'll come? Who needs it?

You're never too young to learn, she says. Come on, it'll be great. We'll all pee our pants laughing.

Is that how we lived, then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now.

We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.

Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The news-

paper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives.

We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom.

We lived in the gaps between the stories.

From below, from the driveway, comes the sound of the car being started. It's quiet in this area, there isn't a lot of traffic, you can hear things like that very clearly: car motors, lawn mowers, the clipping of a hedge, the slam of a door. You could hear a shout clearly, or a shot, if such noises were ever made here. Sometimes there are distant sirens.

I go to the window and sit on the window seat, which is too narrow for comfort. There's a hard little cushion on it, with a petit point cover: FAITH, in square print, surrounded by a wreath of lilies. FAITH is a faded blue, the leaves of the lilies a dingy green. This is a cushion once used elsewhere, worn but not enough to throw out. Somehow it's been overlooked.

I can spend minutes, tens of minutes, running my eyes over the print: FAITH. It's the only thing they've given me to read. If I were caught doing it, would it count? I didn't put the cushion here myself.

The motor turns, and I lean forward, pulling the white curtain across my face, like a veil. It's semisheer, I can see through it. If I press my forehead against the glass and look down, I can see the back half of the Whirlwind. Nobody is there, but as I watch I see Nick come around to the back door of the car, open it, stand stiffly beside it. His cap is straight now and his sleeves rolled down and buttoned. I can't see his face because I'm looking down on him.

Now the Commander is coming out. I glimpse him only for an instant, foreshortened, walking to the car. He doesn't have his hat on, so it's not a formal event he's going to. His hair is gray. Silver, you might call it if you were being kind. I don't feel like being kind. The one before this was bald, so I suppose he's an improvement.

If I could spit, out the window, or throw something, the cushion for instance, I might be able to hit him.

\* \* \*

Moira and I, with paper bags filled with water. Water bombs, they were called. Leaning out my dorm window, dropping them on the heads of the boys below. It was Moira's idea. What were they trying to do? Climb a ladder, for something. For our underwear.

That dormitory had once been coeducational, there were still urinals in one of the washrooms on our floor. But by the time I'd got there they'd put the men and women back the way they were.

The Commander stoops, gets into the car, disappears, and Nick shuts the door. A moment later the car moves backwards, down the driveway and onto the street, and vanishes behind the hedge.

I ought to feel hatred for this man. I know I ought to feel it, but it isn't what I do feel. What I feel is more complicated than that. I don't know what to call it. It isn't love.

Yesterday morning I went to the doctor. Was taken, by a Guardian, one of those with the red arm bands who are in charge of such things. We rode in a red car, him in the front, me in the back. No twin went with me; on these occasions I'm solitaire.

I'm taken to the doctor's once a month, for tests: urine, hormones, cancer smear, blood test; the same as before, except that now it's obligatory.

The doctor's office is in a modern office building. We ride up in the elevator, silently, the Guardian facing me. In the black-mirror wall of the elevator I can see the back of his head. At the office itself, I go in; he waits, outside in the hall, with the other Guardians, on one of the chairs placed there for that purpose.

Inside the waiting room there are other women, three of them, in red: this doctor is a specialist. Covertly we regard each other, sizing up each other's bellies: is anyone lucky? The nurse records our names and the numbers from our passes on the Computoc, to see if we are who we are supposed to be. He's six feet tall, about forty, a diagonal scar across his cheek; he sits typing, his hands too big for the keyboard, still wearing his pistol in the shoulder holster.

When I'm called I go through the doorway into the inner room. It's white, featureless, like the outer one, except for a folding screen,

red cloth stretched on a frame, a gold Eye painted on it, with a snake-twined sword upright beneath it, like a sort of handle. The snakes and the sword are bits of broken symbolism left over from the time before.

After I've filled the small bottle left ready for me in the little washroom, I take off my clothes, behind the screen, and leave them folded on the chair. When I'm naked I lie down on the examining table, on the sheet of chilly crackling disposable paper. I pull the second sheet, the cloth one, up over my body. At neck level there's another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so that the doctor will never see my face. He deals with a torso only.

When I'm arranged I reach my hand out, fumble for the small lever at the right side of the table, pull it back. Somewhere else a bell rings, unheard by me. After a minute the door opens, footsteps come in, there is breathing. He isn't supposed to speak to me except when it's absolutely necessary. But this doctor is talkative.

"How are we getting along?" he says, some tic of speech from the other time. The sheet is lifted from my skin, a draft pimples me. A cold finger, rubber-clad and jellied, slides into me, I am poked and prodded. The finger retreats, enters otherwise, withdraws.

"Nothing wrong with you," the doctor says, as if to himself. "Any pain, honey?" He calls me *boney*.

"No," I say.

My breasts are fingered in their turn, a search for ripeness, rot. The breathing comes nearer. I smell old smoke, aftershave, tobacco dust on hair. Then the voice, very soft, close to my head: that's him, bulging the sheet.

"I could help you," he says. Whispers.

"What?" I say.

"Shh," he says. "I could help you. I've helped others."

"I help me?" I say, my voice as low as his. "How?" Does he know something, has he seen Luke, has he found, can he bring back?

"How do you think?" he says, still barely breathing it. Is that his hand, sliding up my leg? He's taken off the glove. "The door's locked. No one will come in. They'll never know it isn't his."

He lifts the sheet. The lower part of his face is covered by the white gauze mask, regulation. Two brown eyes, a nose, a head

with brown hair on it. His hand is between my legs. "Most of those old guys can't make it anymore," he says. "Or they're sterile."

I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law.

"Lots of women do it," he goes on. "You want a baby, don't you?"

"Yes," I say. It's true, and I don't ask why, because I know. *Give me children, or else I die*. There's more than one meaning to it.

"You're soft," he says. "It's time. Today or tomorrow would do it, why waste it? It'd only take a minute, honey." What he called his wife, once; maybe still does, but really it's a generic term. We are all *boney*.

I hesitate. He's offering himself to me, his services, at some risk to himself.

"I hate to see what they put you through," he murmurs. It's genuine, genuine sympathy; and yet he's enjoying this, sympathy and all. His eyes are moist with compassion, his hand is moving on me, nervously and with impatience.

"It's too dangerous," I say. "No. I can't." The penalty is death. But they have to catch you in the act, with two witnesses. What are the odds, is the room bugged, who's waiting just outside the door?

His hand stops. "Think about it," he says. "I've seen your chart. You don't have a lot of time left. But it's your life."

"Thank you," I say. I must leave the impression that I'm not offended, that I'm open to suggestion. He takes his hand away, lazily almost, lingeringly, this is not the last word as far as he's concerned. He could fake the tests, report me for cancer, for infertility, have me shipped off to the Colonies, with the Unwomen. None of this has been said, but the knowledge of his power hangs nevertheless in the air as he pats my thigh, withdraws himself behind the hanging sheet.

"Next month," he says.

I put on my clothes again, behind the screen. My hands are shaking. Why am I frightened? I've crossed no boundaries, I've given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation.

The bathroom is beside the bedroom. It's papered in small blue flowers, forget-me-nots, with curtains to match. There's a blue bath mat, a blue fake-fur cover on the toilet seat; all this bathroom lacks from the time before is a doll whose skirt conceals the extra roll of toilet paper. Except that the mirror over the sink has been taken out and replaced by an oblong of tin, and the door has no lock, and there are no razors, of course. There were incidents in bathrooms at first: there were cuttings, drownings. Before they got all the bugs ironed out. Cora sits on a chair outside in the hall, to see that no one else goes in. In a bathroom, in a bathtub, you are vulnerable, said Aunt Lydia. She didn't say to what.

The bath is a requirement, but it is also a luxury. Merely to lift off the heavy white wings and the veil, merely to feel my own hair again, with my hands, is a luxury. My hair is long now, untrimmed. Hair must be long but covered. Aunt Lydia said: Saint Paul said it's either that or a close shave. She laughed, that held-back neighing of hers, as if she'd told a joke.

Cora has run the bath. It steams like a bowl of soup. I take off the rest of the clothes, the overdress, the white shift and petticoat, the red stockings, the loose cotton pantaloons. Pantyhose gives you

crotch rot, Moira used to say. Aunt Lydia would never have used an expression like *crotch rot*. *Unhygienic* was hers. She wanted everything to be very hygienic.

My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated. Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. *Shameful, immodest*. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.

I step into the water, lie down, let it hold me. The water is soft as hands. I close my eyes, and she's there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap. I put my face against the soft hair at the back of her neck and breathe her in, baby powder and child's washed flesh and shampoo, with an undertone, the faint scent of urine. This is the age she is when I'm in the bath. She comes back to me at different ages. This is how I know she's not really a ghost. If she were a ghost she would be the same age always.

One day, when she was eleven months old, just before she began to walk, a woman stole her out of a supermarket cart. It was a Saturday, which was when Luke and I did the week's shopping, because both of us had jobs. She was sitting in the little baby seats they had then, in supermarket carts, with holes for the legs. She was happy enough, and I'd turned my back, the cat-food section I think it was; Luke was over at the side of the store, out of sight, at the meat counter. He liked to choose what kind of meat we were going to eat during the week. He said men needed more meat than women did, and that it wasn't a superstition and he wasn't being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences, he said. He was fond of saying that, as if I was trying to prove there weren't. But mostly he said it when my mother was there. He liked to tease her.

I heard her start to cry. I turned around and she was disappearing down the aisle, in the arms of a woman I'd never seen before. I screamed, and the woman was stopped. She must have been about thirty-five. She was crying and saying it was her baby, the Lord

had given it to her, he'd sent her a sign. I felt sorry for her. The store manager apologized and they held her until the police came.

She's just crazy, Luke said.

I thought it was an isolated incident, at the time.

She fades, I can't keep her here with me, she's gone now. Maybe I do think of her as a ghost, the ghost of a dead girl, a little girl who died when she was five. I remember the pictures of us I had once, me holding her, standard poses, mother and baby, locked in a frame, for safety. Behind my closed eyes I can see myself as I am now, sitting beside an open drawer, or a trunk, in the cellar, where the baby clothes are folded away, a lock of hair, cut when she was two, in an envelope, white-blond. It got darker later.

I don't have those things anymore, the clothes and hair. I wonder what happened to all our things. Looted, dumped out, carried away. Confiscated.

I've learned to do without a lot of things. If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values. You must cultivate poverty of spirit. Blessed are the meek. She didn't go on to say anything about inheriting the earth.

I lie, lapped by the water, beside an open drawer that does not exist, and think about a girl who did not die when she was five; who still does exist, I hope, though not for me. Do I exist for her? Am I a picture somewhere, in the dark at the back of her mind?

They must have told her I was dead. That's what they would think of doing. They would say it would be easier for her to adjust.

Eight, she must be now. I've filled in the time I lost, I know how much there's been. They were right, it's easier, to think of her as dead. I don't have to hope then, or make a wasted effort. Why bash your head, said Aunt Lydia, against a wall? Sometimes she had a graphic way of putting things.

"I ain't got all day," says Cora's voice outside the door. It's true, she hasn't. She hasn't got all of anything. I must not deprive her of her time. I soap myself, use the scrub brush and the piece of pumice for sanding off dead skin. Such puritan aids are supplied. I wish to be totally clean, germless, without bacteria, like the surface of

the moon. I will not be able to wash myself, this evening, not afterwards, not for a day. It interferes, they say, and why take chances?

I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource.

I pull the plug, dry myself, put on my red terrycloth robe. I leave today's dress here, where Cora will pick it up to be washed. Back in the room I dress again. The white headdress isn't necessary for the evening, because I won't be going out. Everyone in this house knows what my face looks like. The red veil goes on, though, covering my damp hair, my head, which has not been shaved. Where did I see that film, about the women, kneeling in the town square, hands holding them, their hair falling in clumps? What had they done? It must have been a long time ago, because I can't remember.

Cora brings my supper, covered, on a tray. She knocks at the door before entering. I like her for that. It means she thinks I have some of what we used to call privacy left.

"Thank you," I say, taking the tray from her, and she actually smiles at me, but she turns away without answering. When we're alone together she's shy of me.

I put the tray on the small white-painted table and draw the chair up to it. I take the cover off the tray. The thigh of a chicken, overcooked. It's better than bloody, which is the other way she does it. Rita has ways of making her resentments felt. A baked potato, green beans, salad. Canned pears for dessert. It's good enough food, though bland. Healthy food. You have to get your vitamins and minerals, said Aunt Lydia coyly. You must be a worthy vessel. No coffee or tea though, no alcohol. Studies have been done. There's a paper napkin, as in cafeterias.

I think of the others, those without. This is the heartland, here, I'm leading a pampered life, may the Lord make us truly grateful, said Aunt Lydia, or was it thankful, and I start to eat the food. I'm not hungry tonight. I feel sick to my stomach. But there's no place to put the food, no potted plants, and I won't chance the toilet. I'm too nervous, that's what it is. Could I leave it on the plate, ask Cora not to report me? I chew and swallow, chew and swallow, feeling

the sweat come out. In my stomach the food balls itself together, a handful of damp cardboard, squeezed.

Downstairs, in the dining room, there will be candles on the large mahogany table, a white cloth, silver, flowers, wine glasses with wine in them. There will be the click of knives against china, a clink as she sets down her fork, with a barely audible sigh, leaving half the contents of her plate untouched. Possibly she will say she has no appetite. Possibly she won't say anything. If she says something, does he comment? If she doesn't say anything, does he notice? I wonder how she manages to get herself noticed. I think it must be hard.

There's a pat of butter on the side of the plate. I tear off a corner of the paper napkin, wrap the butter in it, take it to the cupboard and slip it into the toe of my right shoe, from the extra pair, as I have done before. I crumple up the rest of the napkin: no one, surely, will bother to smooth it out, to check if any is missing. I will use the butter later tonight. It would not do, this evening, to smell of butter.

I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.

v

*Nap*