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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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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 miniskirts, then pants, then in 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 a 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 after-thought, 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 flannel-ette 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 cat-tle prods slung on thongs 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 tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semidarkness 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.

A chair, a table, a lamp. Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the center 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 re-moved 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, watercolor. 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 watercolor picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass in it is shattered. 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, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color 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 color. 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 center, 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 on 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 flesh tones 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 colored 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, a pier glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale 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 on the veil to go outside, but nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha. Her sleeves are rolled to the elbow, showing her brown arms. She's making bread, throwing the loaves for the final brief kneading and then the shaping.

Rita sees me and nods, whether in greeting or in simple acknowl-

edgment of my presence it's hard to say, and wipes her floury hands on her apron and rummages in the kitchen drawer 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 any 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 tubes tied, it could of been me, say I was ten years younger. It's not that bad. It's not what you'd 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 into. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signaling 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 bear where you're coming from*, as if the voice itself were a traveler, 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*. *Jealousy, it must have been, eating her up*. Or, tantalizingly, *It was toilet cleaner she used*. *Worked like a charm, though you'd think be'd of tasted it*. *Must've been that drunk; but they found her out all right*.

Or I would help Rita 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 last time. And a chicken, tell them, 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?

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 lines. 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 across 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 unraveled 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 honor, 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 inward. She must have been waiting behind it. I 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 thresholds.

Yes, I said.

3

I go out by the back door, into the garden, which is large and tidy: a lawn in the middle, a 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 color. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem, as if they have been cut and are beginning to heal there.

This garden is the domain of the Commander's Wife. Looking out through my shatterproof 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

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 heavier 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 my 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-colored. The cigarettes must have come from the black market, I thought, and this gave me hope. Even now that there is no real money anymore, 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, they 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 blond. 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 blond. 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 downward 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 Marthas said she drank. I wanted this one to be different. I wanted to think I would have liked her, in 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 favored 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 monotone, 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 blond, petite, with a snub nose and huge blue eyes which she'd 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.

4

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 pink, 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. That 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 Chartot, much better than the chunky, practical Behemoth. It's black, of course, the color 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 hairs. 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 odor. 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 color of the bricks is old, 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 it 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 anymore, 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 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 reach 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 mustache 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, anyway, 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 Compuchck.

In returning my pass, the one with the peach-colored mustache 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? This 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 in 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. If 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 their 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, of being allotted a Handmaid of their own.

The one with the mustache opens the small pedestrian gate for us and stands back, well out 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 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.

Doubled, I walk the street. Though we are no longer in the Commanders' compound, there are large houses here also. In front of one of them a Guardian is mowing the lawn. The lawns are tidy, the façades are gracious, in good repair; they're like the beautiful pictures they used to print in the magazines about homes and gardens and interior decoration. There is the same absence of people, the same air of being asleep. The street is almost like a museum, or a street in a model town constructed to show the way people used to live. As in those pictures, those museums, those model towns, there are no children.

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the center, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.

Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers anymore, and the university is closed.

Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the children. We would have children. Although we knew it wasn't too

likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays. Such freedom now seems almost weightless.

We turn the corner onto a main street, where there's more traffic. Cars go by, black most of them, some gray and brown. There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can. Sometimes there is a woman all in black, a widow. There used to be more of them, but they seem to be diminishing.

You don't see the Commanders' Wives on the sidewalks. Only in cars.

The sidewalks here are cement. Like a child, I avoid stepping on the cracks. I'm remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on them. Sometimes it was shoes for running, with cushioned soles and breathing holes, and stars of fluorescent fabric that reflected light in the darkness. Though I never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads. Women were not protected then.

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: Don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night.

I think about laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself. I think about having such control.

Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles.

There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it.

In front of us, to the right, is the store where we order dresses. Some people call them *babits*, a good word for them. Habits are

hard to break. The store has a huge wooden sign outside it, in the shape of a golden lily; Lilies of the Field, it's called. You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone.

Lilies used to be a movie theater, before. Students went there a lot; every spring they had a Humphrey Bogart festival, with Lauren Bacall or Katharine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word *undone*. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then. We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice.

I don't know when they stopped having the festival. I must have been grown up. So I didn't notice.

We don't go into Lilies, but across the road and along a side street. Our first stop is at a store with another wooden sign: three eggs, a bee, a cow. Milk and Honey. There's a line, and we wait our turn, two by two. I see they have oranges today. Ever since Central America was lost to the Libertheos, oranges have been hard to get: sometimes they are there, sometimes not. The war interferes with the oranges from California, and even Florida isn't dependable, when there are roadblocks or when the train tracks have been blown up. I look at the oranges, longing for one. But I haven't brought any coupons for oranges. I'll go back and tell Rita about them, I think. She'll be pleased. It will be something, a small achievement, to have made oranges happen.

Those who've reached the counter hand their tokens across it, to the two men in Guardian uniforms who stand on the other side. Nobody talks much, though there is a rustling, and the women's heads move furtively from side to side: here, shopping, is where you might see someone you know, someone you've known in the time before, or at the Red Center. Just to catch sight of a face like that is an encouragement. If I could see Moira, just see her, know she still exists. It's hard to imagine now, having a friend.

But Ofglen, beside me, isn't looking. Maybe she doesn't know anyone anymore. Maybe they have all vanished, the women she knew. Or maybe she doesn't want to be seen. She stands in silence, head down

As we wait in our double line, the door opens and two more women come in, both in the red dresses and white wings of the Handmaids. One of them is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly. There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved.

The women in the room are whispering, almost talking, so great is their excitement.

"Who is it?" I hear behind me.

"Ofwayne. No. Ofwarren."

"Showoff," a voice hisses, and this is true. A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out, doesn't have to go shopping. The daily walk is no longer prescribed, to keep her abdominal muscles in working order. She needs only the floor exercises, the breathing drill. She could stay at her house. And it's dangerous for her to be out, there must be a Guardian standing outside the door, waiting for her. Now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security. Jealousy could get her, it's happened before. All children are wanted now, but not by everyone.

But the walk may be a whim of hers, and they humor whims, when something has gone this far and there's been no miscarriage. Or perhaps she's one of those, *Pile it on, I can take it*, a martyr. I catch a glimpse of her face, as she raises it to look around. The voice behind me was right. She's come here to display herself. She's glowing, rosy, she's enjoying every minute of this.

"Quiet," says one of the Guardians behind the counter, and we hush like schoolgirls.

Ofglen and I have reached the counter. We hand over our tokens, and one Guardian enters the numbers on them into the Computibite while the other gives us our purchases, the milk, the eggs. We put them into our baskets and go out again, past the pregnant woman and her partner, who beside her looks spindly, shrunken; as we all do. The pregnant woman's belly is like a huge fruit. *Humungous*, word of my childhood. Her hands rest on it as if to defend it, or as if they're gathering something from it, warmth and strength.

As I pass she looks full at me, into my eyes, and I know who she is. She was at the Red Center with me, one of Aunt Lydia's pets. I never liked her. Her name, in the time before, was Janine.

Janine looks at me, then, and around the corners of her mouth there is the trace of a smirk. She glances down to where my own belly lies flat under my red robe, and the wings cover her face. I can see only a little of her forehead, and the pinkish tip of her nose.

Next we go into All Flesh, which is marked by a large wooden pork chop hanging from two chains. There isn't so much of a line here: meat is expensive, and even the Commanders don't have it every day. Ofglen gets steak, though, and that's the second time this week. I'll tell that to the Marthas: it's the kind of thing they enjoy hearing about. They are very interested in how other households are run; such bits of petty gossip give them an opportunity for pride or discontent.

I take the chicken, wrapped in butcher's paper and trussed with string. Not many things are plastic, anymore. I remember those endless white plastic shopping bags, from the supermarket; I hated to waste them and would stuff them in under the sink, until the day would come when there would be too many and I would open the cupboard door and they would bulge out, sliding over the floor. Luke used to complain about it. Periodically he would take all the bags and throw them out.

She could get one of those over her head, he'd say. You know how kids like to play. She never would, I'd say. She's too old. (Or too smart, or too lucky.) But I would feel a chill of fear, and then guilt for having been so careless. It was true, I took too much for granted; I trusted fate, back then. I'll keep them in a higher cupboard, I'd say. Don't keep them at all, he'd say. We never use them for anything. Garbage bags, I'd say. He'd say . . .

Not here and now. Not where people are looking. I turn, see my silhouette in the plate glass window. We have come outside, then, we are on the street.

A group of people is coming towards us. They're tourists, from Japan it looks like, a trade delegation perhaps, on a tour of the historic landmarks or out for local color. They're diminutive and

neatly turned out; each has his or her camera, his or her smile. They look around, bright-eyed, cocking their heads to one side like robins, their very cheerfulness aggressive, and I can't help staring. It's been a long time since I've seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture. The women teeter on their spiked feet as if on stilts, but off balance; their backs arch at the waist, thrusting the buttocks out. Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a wash-room wall, of the time before.

I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this.

Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom. *Westernized*, they used to call it.

The Japanese tourists come towards us, twittering, and we turn our heads away too late: our faces have been seen.

There's an interpreter, in the standard blue suit and red-pat-terned tie, with the winged-eye tie pin. He's the one who steps forward, out of the group, in front of us, blocking our way. The tourists bunch behind him; one of them raises a camera.

"Excuse me," he says to both of us, politely enough. "They're asking if they can take your picture."

I look down at the sidewalk, shake my head for no. What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes. I know better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes, or so it's said.

I also know better than to say yes. Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen — to be *seen* — is to be — her voice trembled — penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls.

Beside me, Ofglen is also silent. She's tucked her red-gloved hands up into her sleeves, to hide them.

The interpreter turns back to the group, chatters at them in stac-

cato. I know what he'll be saying, I know the line. He'll be telling them that the women here have different customs, that to stare at them through the lens of a camera is, for them, an experience of violation.

I'm looking down, at the sidewalk, mesmerized by the women's feet. One of them is wearing open-toed sandals, the toenails painted pink. I remember the smell of nail polish, the way it wrinkled if you put the second coat on too soon, the satiny brushing of sheer pantyhose against the skin, the way the toes felt, pushed towards the opening in the shoe by the whole weight of the body. The woman with painted toes shifts from one foot to the other. I can feel her shoes, on my own feet. The smell of nail polish has made me hungry.

"Excuse me," says the interpreter again, to catch our attention. I nod, to show I've heard him.

"He asks, are you happy," says the interpreter. I can imagine it, their curiosity: *Are they happy? How can they be happy?* I can feel their bright black eyes on us, the way they lean a little forward to catch our answers, the women especially, but the men too: we are secret, forbidden, we excite them.

Ofglen says nothing. There is a silence. But sometimes it's as dangerous not to speak.

"Yes, we are very happy," I murmur. I have to say something. What else can I say?

A block past All Flesh, Ofglen pauses, as if hesitant about which way to go. We have a choice. We could go straight back, or we could walk the long way around. We already know which way we will take, because we always take it.

"I'd like to pass by the church," says Ofglen, as if piously.

"All right," I say, though I know as well as she does what she's really after.

We walk, sedately. The sun is out, in the sky there are white fluffy clouds, the kind that look like headless sheep. Given our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps.

To the right, if you could walk along, there's a street that would take you down towards the river. There's a boathouse, where they kept the sculls once, and some bridges; trees, green banks, where you could sit and watch the water, and the young men with their naked arms, their oars lifting into the sunlight as they played at winning. On the way to the river are the old dormitories, used for something else now, with their fairy-tale turrets, painted white and gold and blue. When we think of the past it's the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that.

The football stadium is that way too, where they hold the Men's

Salvagings. As well as the football games. They still have those.

I don't go to the river anymore, or over bridges. Or on the subway, although there's a station right there. We're not allowed on, there are Guardians now, there's no official reason for us to go down those steps, ride on the trains under the river, into the main city. Why would we want to go from here to there? We would be up to no good and they would know it.

The church is a small one, one of the first erected here, hundreds of years ago. It isn't used anymore, except as a museum. Inside it you can see paintings, of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white caps, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors. Admission is free.

We don't go in, though, but stand on the path, looking at the churchyard. The old gravestones are still there, weathered, eroding, with their skulls and crossed bones, *memento mori*, their dough-faced angels, their winged hourglasses to remind us of the passing of mortal time, and, from a later century, their urns and willow trees, for mourning.

They haven't fiddled with the gravestones, or the church either. It's only the more recent history that offends them.

Ofglen's head is bowed, as if she's praying. She does this every time. Maybe, I think, there's someone, someone in particular gone, for her too; a man, a child. But I can't entirely believe it. I think of her as a woman for whom every act is done for show, is acting rather than a real act. She does such things to look good, I think. She's out to make the best of it.

But that is what I must look like to her, as well. How can it be otherwise?

Now we turn our backs on the church and there is the thing we've in truth come to see: the Wall.

The Wall is hundreds of years old too; or over a hundred, at least. Like the sidewalks, it's red brick, and must once have been plain but handsome. Now the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it, and barbed wire along the bottom and broken glass set in concrete along the top.

No one goes through those gates willingly. The precautions are for those trying to get out, though to make it even as far as the Wall, from the inside, past the electronic alarm system, would be next to impossible.

Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have been a Men's Salvaging early this morning. I didn't hear the bells. Perhaps I've become used to them.

We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them.

What they are hanging from is hooks. The hooks have been set into the brickwork of the Wall, for this purpose. Not all of them are occupied. The hooks look like appliances for the armless. Or steel question marks, upside-down and sideways.

It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare. Or as if their heads are sacks, stuffed with some undifferentiated material, like flour or dough. It's the obvious heaviness of the heads, their vacancy, the way gravity pulls them down and there's no life anymore to hold them up. The heads are zeros.

Though if you look and look, as we are doing, you can see the outlines of the features under the white cloth, like gray shadows. The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting.

But on one bag there's blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouths painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child's idea of a smile. This smile of blood is what fixes the attention, finally. These are not snowmen after all.

The men wear white coats, like those worn by doctors or scientists. Doctors and scientists aren't the only ones, there are others, but they must have had a run on them this morning. Each has a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human fetus. They were doctors, then, in the time before, when such things were legal. Angel makers, they used to call them; or was that something else? They've been turned up now by the searches through hospital records, or — more likely, since

most hospitals destroyed such records once it became clear what was going to happen — by informants: ex-nurses perhaps, or a pair of them, since evidence from a single woman is no longer admissible; or another doctor, hoping to save his own skin; or someone already accused, lashing out at an enemy, or at random, in some desperate bid for safety. Though informants are not always pardoned.

These men, we've been told, are like war criminals. It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples, for the rest. Though this is hardly needed. No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive.

What we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn. This isn't what I feel. These bodies hanging on the Wall are time travelers, anachronisms. They've come here from the past.

What I feel towards them is blankness. What I feel is that I must not feel. What I feel is partly relief, because none of these men is Luke. Luke wasn't a doctor. Isn't.

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind.

I feel a tremor in the woman beside me. Is she crying? In what way could it make her look good? I can't afford to know. My own hands are clenched, I note, tight around the handle of my basket. I won't give anything away.

Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary.

The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still. The difference between *lie* and *lay*. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don't really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it.

I lie, then, inside the room, under the plaster eye in the ceiling, behind the white curtains, between the sheets, neatly as they, and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it.

But the night is my time out. Where should I go?

Somewhere good.

Moirra, sitting on the edge of my bed, legs crossed, ankle on knee, in her purple overalls, one dangly earring, the gold fingernail she wore to be eccentric, a cigarette between her stubby yellow-ended fingers. Let's go for a beer.

You're getting ashes in my bed, I said.

If you'd make it you wouldn't have this problem, said Moirra.

In half an hour, I said. I had a paper due the next day. What was it? Psychology, English, economics. We studied things like that,

then. On the floor of the room there were books, open face down, this way and that, extravagantly.

Now, said Moira. You don't need to paint your face, it's only me. What's your paper on? I just did one on date rape.

Date rape, I said. You're so trendy. It sounds like some kind of dessert. *Date rapé.*

Ha-ha, said Moira. Get your coat.

She got it herself and tossed it at me. I'm borrowing five bucks off you, okay?

Or in a park somewhere, with my mother. How old was I? It was cold, our breaths came out in front of us, there were no leaves on the trees; gray sky, two ducks in the pond, disconsolate. Bread crumbs under my fingers, in my pocket. That's it: she said we were going to feed the ducks.

But there were some women burning books, that's what she was really there for. To see her friends; she'd lied to me, Saturdays were supposed to be my day. I turned away from her, sulking, towards the ducks, but the fire drew me back.

There were some men, too, among the women, and the books were magazines. They must have poured gasoline, because the flames shot high, and then they began dumping the magazines, from boxes, not too many at a time. Some of them were chanting; onlookers gathered.

Their faces were happy, ecstatic almost. Fire can do that. Even my mother's face, usually pale, thinnish, looked ruddy and cheerful, like a Christmas card; and there was another woman, large, with a soot smear down her cheek and an orange knitted cap, I remember her.

You want to throw one on, honey? she said. How old was I?

Good riddance to bad rubbish, she said, chuckling. It okay? she said to my mother.

If she wants to, my mother said; she had a way of talking about me to others as if I couldn't hear.

The woman handed me one of the magazines. It had a pretty woman on it, with no clothes on, hanging from the ceiling by a chain wound around her hands. I looked at it with interest. It didn't frighten me. I thought she was swinging, like Tarzan from a vine, on the TV.

Don't let her see it, said my mother. Here, she said to me, toss it in, quick.

I threw the magazine into the flames. It riffled open in the wind of its burning; big flakes of paper came loose, sailed into the air, still on fire, parts of women's bodies, turning to black ash, in the air, before my eyes.

But then what happens, but then what happens?

I know I lost time.

There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn't have lost that much time without help. You have had a shock, they said.

I would come up through a roaring and confusion, like surf boiling. I can remember feeling quite calm. I can remember screaming, it felt like screaming though it may have been only a whisper, *Where is she? What have you done with her?*

There was no night or day; only a flickering. After a while there were chairs again, and a bed, and after that a window.

She's in good hands, they said. With people who are fit. You are unfit, but you want the best for her. Don't you?

They showed me a picture of her, standing outside on a lawn, her face a closed oval. Her light hair was pulled back tight behind her head. Holding her hand was a woman I didn't know. She was only as tall as the woman's elbow.

You've killed her, I said. She looked like an angel, solemn, compact, made of air.

She was wearing a dress I'd never seen, white and down to the ground.

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along.

Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if it's a story, even in my head,

I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else.

Even when there is no one.

A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you*, without a name. Attaching a name attaches *you* to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you, you*, like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one.

You can mean thousands.

I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you.

I'll pretend you can hear me.

But it's no good, because I know you can't.

IV

Waiting Room

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*.

My 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: *Noiite 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? I 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: FATH, in square print, surrounded by a wreath of lilies. FATH 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: FATH. 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.

11

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 *Compudoc*, 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."

"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.

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

12

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

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.

There's time to spare. This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for — the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound. If only I could embroider. Weave, knit, something to do with my hands. I want a cigarette. I remember walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century; the obsession they had then with harems. Dozens of paintings of harems, fat women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps, being fanned with peacock tails, a eunuch in the background standing guard. Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there. These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time; but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were paintings about boredom.

But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men.

I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig. Sometime in the eighties they invented pig balls, for pigs who were being fattened in pens. Pig balls were large colored balls; the pigs rolled them around with their snouts. The pig marketers said this improved their muscle tone; the pigs were curious, they liked to have something to think about.

I read about that in Introduction to Psychology; that, and the chapter on caged rats who'd give themselves electric shocks for something to do. And the one on the pigeons, trained to peck a button that made a grain of corn appear. Three groups of them: the first got one grain per peck, the second one grain every other peck, the third was random. When the man in charge cut off the grain, the first group gave up quite soon, the second group a little later. The third group never gave up. They'd peck themselves to death, rather than quit. Who knew what worked?

I wish I had a pig ball.

I lie down on the braided rug. You can always practice, said Aunt Lydia. Several sessions a day, fitted into your daily routine. Arms at the sides, knees bent, lift the pelvis, roll the backbone down. Tuck. Again. Breathe in to the count of five, hold, expel. We'd do that in what used to be the Domestic Science room, cleared now of sewing machines and washer-dryers; in unison, lying on little Japanese mats, a tape playing, *Les Sylphides*. That's what I hear now, in my head, as I lift, tilt, breathe. Behind my closed eyes thin white dancers flit gracefully among the trees, their legs fluttering like the wings of held birds.

In the afternoons we lay on our beds for an hour in the gymnasium, between three and four. They said it was a period of rest and meditation. I thought then they did it because they wanted some time off themselves, from teaching us, and I know the Aunts not on duty went off to the teachers' room for a cup of coffee, or whatever they called by that name. But now I think that the rest also was practice. They were giving us a chance to get used to blank time.

A catnap, Aunt Lydia called it, in her coy way.

The strange thing is we needed the rest. Many of us went to sleep. We were tired there, a lot of the time. We were on some kind of pill or drug I think, they put it in the food, to keep us calm. But maybe not. Maybe it was the place itself. After the first shock, after you'd come to terms, it was better to be lethargic. You could tell yourself you were saving up your strength.

I must have been there three weeks when Moira came. She was brought into the gymnasium by two of the Aunts. in the usual way

while we were having our nap. She still had her other clothes on, jeans and a blue sweatshirt — her hair was short, she'd defied fashion as usual — so I recognized her at once. She saw me too, but she turned away, she already knew what was safe. There was a bruise on her left cheek, turning purple. The Aunts took her to a vacant bed where the red dress was already laid out. She undressed, began to dress again, in silence, the Aunts standing at the end of the bed, the rest of us watching from inside our slitted eyes. As she bent over I could see the knobs on her spine.

I couldn't talk to her for several days; we looked only, small glances, like sips. Friendships were suspicious, we knew it, we avoided each other during the mealtime line-ups in the cafeteria and in the halls between classes. But on the fourth day she was beside me during the walk, two by two around the football field. We weren't given the white wings until we graduated, we had only the veils; so we could talk, as long as we did it quietly and didn't turn to look at one another. The Aunts walked at the head of the line and at the end, so the only danger was from the others. Some were believers and might report us.

This is a loony bin, Moira said.

I'm so glad to see you, I said.

Where can we talk? said Moira.

Washroom, I said. Watch the clock. End stall, two-thirty.

That was all we said.

It makes me feel safer, that Moira is here. We can go to the washroom if we put our hands up, though there's a limit to how many times a day, they mark it down on a chart. I watch the clock, electric and round, at the front over the green blackboard. Two-thirty comes during Testifying. Aunt Helena is here, as well as Aunt Lydia, because Testifying is special. Aunt Helena is fat, she once headed a Weight Watchers' franchise operation in Iowa. She's good at Testifying.

It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. She told the same story last week. She seemed almost proud of it, while she was telling. It may not even be true. At Testifying, it's safer to make things up than to say you have nothing to reveal. But since it's Janine, it's probably more or less

THIS

But *whose* fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.

Her fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison.

Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.

She did. *She* did. *She* did.

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*.

Last week, Janine burst into tears. Aunt Helena made her kneel at the front of the classroom, hands behind her back, where we could all see her, her red face and dripping nose. Her hair dull blond, her eyelashes so light they seemed not there, the lost eyelashes of someone who's been in a fire. Burned eyes. She looked disgusting: weak, squirmy, blotchy, pink, like a newborn mouse. None of us wanted to look like that, ever. For a moment, even though we knew what was being done to her, we despised her. Crybaby. Crybaby. Crybaby.

We meant it, which is the bad part.

I used to think well of myself. I didn't then.

That was last week. This week Janine doesn't wait for us to jeer at her. It was my fault, she says. It was my own fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain.

Very good, Janine, says Aunt Lydia. You are an example.

I have to wait until this is over before I put up my hand. Sometimes, if you ask at the wrong moment, they say no. If you really have to go that can be crucial. Yesterday Dolores wet the floor. Two Aunts hauled her away, a hand under each armpit. She wasn't there for the afternoon walk, but at night she was back in her usual bed. All night we could hear her moaning, off and on.

What did they do to her? we whispered, from bed to bed. I don't know.

Not knowing makes it worse.

I raise my hand, Aunt Lydia nods. I stand up and walk out into the hall, as inconspicuously as possible. Outside the washroom Aunt Elizabeth is standing guard. She nods, signaling that I can go in.

This washroom used to be for boys. The mirrors have been replaced here too by oblongs of dull gray metal, but the urinals are still there, on one wall, white enamel with yellow stains. They look oddly like babies' coffins. I marvel again at the nakedness of men's lives: the showers right out in the open. the body exposed for in-

spection and comparison, the public display of privates. What is it for? What purposes of reassurance does it serve? The flashing of a badge, look, everyone, all is in order, I belong here. Why don't women have to prove to one another that they are women? Some form of unbuttoning, some split-crotch routine, just as casual. A doglike sniffing.

The high school is old, the stalls are wooden, some kind of chip-board. I go into the second one from the end, swing the door to. Of course there are no longer any locks. In the wood there's a small hole, at the back, next to the wall, about waist height, souvenir of some previous vandalism or legacy of an ancient voyeur. Everyone in the Center knows about this hole in the woodwork; everyone except the Aunts.

I'm afraid I am too late, held up by Janine's Testifying: maybe Moira has been here already, maybe she's had to go back. They don't give you much time. I look carefully down, aslant under the stall wall, and there are two red shoes. But how can I tell who it is? I put my mouth to the wooden hole. Moira? I whisper.

Is that you? she says.

Yes, I say. Relief goes through me.

God, do I need a cigarette, says Moira.

Me too, I say.

I feel ridiculously happy.

I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own.

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed

around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel within it, countless as stars. Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time.

I'm in our first apartment, in the bedroom. I'm standing in front of the cupboard, which has folding doors made of wood. Around me I know it's empty, all the furniture is gone, the floors are bare, no carpets even; but despite this the cupboard is full of clothes. I think they're my clothes, but they don't look like mine, I've never seen them before. Maybe they're clothes belonging to Luke's wife, whom I've also never seen; only pictures and a voice on the phone, late at night, when she was calling us, crying, accusing, before the divorce. But no, they're my clothes all right. I need a dress, I need something to wear. I pull out dresses, black, blue, purple, jackets, skirts; none of them will do, none of them even fits, they're too big or too small.

Luke is there, behind me, I turn to see him. He won't look at me, he looks down at the floor, where the cat is rubbing itself against his legs, mewing and mewing plaintively. It wants food, but how can there be any food with the apartment so empty?

Luke, I say. He doesn't answer. Maybe he doesn't hear me. It occurs to me that he may not be alive.

I'm running, with her, holding her hand, pulling, dragging her through the bracken, she's only half awake because of the pill I gave her, so she wouldn't cry or say anything that would give us away, she doesn't know where she is. The ground is uneven, rocks, dead branches, the smell of damp earth, old leaves, she can't run fast enough, by myself I could run faster, I'm a good runner. Now she's crying, she's frightened, I want to carry her but she would be too heavy. I have my hiking boots on and I think, when we reach the water I'll have to kick them off, will it be too cold, will she be able

to swim that far, what about the current, we weren't expecting this. *Quiet*, I say to her angrily. I think about her drowning and this thought slows me. Then the shots come behind us, not loud, not like firecrackers, but sharp and crisp like a dry branch snapping. It sounds wrong, nothing ever sounds the way you think it will, and I hear the voice, *Down*, is it a real voice or a voice inside my head or my own voice, out loud?

I pull her to the ground and roll on top of her to cover her, shield her. *Quiet*, I say again, my face is wet, sweat or tears, I feel calm and floating, as if I'm no longer in my body; close to my eyes there's a leaf, red, turned early, I can see every bright vein. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I ease off, I don't want to smother her, instead I curl myself around her, keeping my hand over her mouth. There's breath and the knocking of my heart, like pounding, at the door of a house at night, where you thought you would be safe. *It's all right, I'm here*, I say, whisper, *Please be quiet*, but how can she? She's too young, it's too late, we come apart, my arms are held, and the edges go dark and nothing is left but a little window, a very little window, like the wrong end of a telescope, like the window on a Christmas card, an old one, night and ice outside, and within a candle, a shining tree, a family, I can hear the bells even, sleigh bells, from the radio, old music, but through this window I can see, small but very clear, I can see her, going away from me, through the trees which are already turning, red and yellow, holding out her arms to me, being carried away.

The bell wakes me; and then Cora, knocking at my door. I sit up, on the rug, wipe my wet face with my sleeve. Of all the dreams this is the worst.

When the bell has finished I descend the stairs, a brief waif in the eye of glass that hangs on the downstairs wall. The clock ticks with its pendulum, keeping time; my feet in their neat red shoes count the way down.

The sitting room door is wide open. I go in: so far no one else is here. I don't sit, but take my place, kneeling, near the chair with the footstool where Serena Joy will shortly enthrone herself, leaning on her cane while she lowers herself down. Possibly she'll put a hand on my shoulder, to steady herself, as if I'm a piece of furniture. She's done it before.

The sitting room would once have been called a drawing room, perhaps; then a living room. Or maybe it's a parlor, the kind with a spider and flies. But now it's officially a sitting room, because that's what is done in it, by some. For others there's standing room only. The posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive.

The sitting room is subdued, symmetrical; it's one of the shapes money takes when it freezes. Money has trickled through this room for years and years, as if through an underground cavern, crusting and hardening like stalactites into these forms. Mutely the varied surfaces present themselves: the dusk-rose velvet of the drawn drapes,

the gloss of the matching chairs, eighteenth century, the cow's-tongue hush of the tufted Chinese rug on the floor, with its peach-pink peonies, the suave leather of the Commander's chair, the glint of brass on the box beside it.

The rug is authentic. Some things in this room are authentic, some are not. For instance, two paintings, both of women, one on either side of the fireplace. Both wear dark dresses, like the ones in the old church, though of a later date. The paintings are possibly authentic. I suspect that when Serena Joy acquired them, after it became obvious to her that she'd have to redirect her energies into something convincingly domestic, she had the intention of passing them off as ancestors. Or maybe they were in the house when the Commander bought it. There's no way of knowing such things. In any case, there they hang, their backs and mouths stiff, their breasts constricted, their faces pinched, their caps starched, their skin grayish white, guarding the room with their narrowed eyes.

Between them, over the mantel, there's an oval mirror, flanked by two pairs of silver candlesticks, with a white china Cupid centered between them, its arm around the neck of a lamb. The tastes of Serena Joy are a strange blend: hard lust for quality, soft sentimental cravings. There's a dried flower arrangement on either end of the mantelpiece, and a vase of real daffodils on the polished marquetry end table beside the sofa.

The room smells of lemon oil, heavy cloth, fading daffodils, the leftover smells of cooking that have made their way from the kitchen or the dining room, and of Serena Joy's perfume: Lily of the Valley. Perfume is a luxury, she must have some private source. I breathe it in, thinking I should appreciate it. It's the scent of pre-pubescent girls, of the gifts young children used to give their mothers, for Mother's Day; the smell of white cotton socks and white cotton petticoats, of dusting powder, of the innocence of female flesh not yet given over to hairiness and blood. It makes me feel slightly ill, as if I'm in a closed car on a hot muggy day with an older woman wearing too much face powder. This is what the sitting room is like, despite its elegance.

I would like to steal something from this room. I would like to take some small thing, the scrolled ashtray, the little silver pillbox from the mantel perhaps, or a dried flower: hide it in the folds of

my dress or in my zippered sleeve, keep it there until this evening is over, secrete it in my room, under the bed, or in a shoe, or in a slit in the hard petit point FATH cushion. Every once in a while I would take it out and look at it. It would make me feel that I have power.

But such a feeling would be an illusion, and too risky. My hands stay where they are, folded in my lap. Thighs together, heels tucked underneath me, pressing up against my body. Head lowered. In my mouth there's the taste of toothpaste: fake mint and plaster.

I wait, for the household to assemble. *Household*: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part.

The hold of a ship. Hollow.

Cora comes in first, then Rita, wiping her hands on her apron. They too have been summoned by the bell, they resent it, they have other things to do, the dishes for instance. But they need to be here, they all need to be here, the Ceremony demands it. We are all obliged to sit through this, one way or another.

Rita scowls at me before slipping in to stand behind me. It's my fault, this waste of her time. Not mine, but my body's, if there is a difference. Even the Commander is subject to its whims.

Nick walks in, nods to all three of us, looks around the room. He too takes his place behind me, standing. He's so close that the tip of his boot is touching my foot. Is this on purpose? Whether it is or not we are touching, two shapes of leather. I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin. I move my foot slightly, away.

"Wish he'd hurry up," says Cora.

"Hurry up and wait," says Nick. He laughs, moves his foot so it's touching mine again. No one can see, beneath the folds of my outspread skirt. I shift, it's too warm in here, the smell of stale perfume makes me feel a little sick. I move my foot away.

We hear Serena coming, down the stairs, along the hall, the muffled tap of her cane on the rug, thud of the good foot. She hobbles through the doorway, glances at us, counting but not seeing. She nods, at Nick, but says nothing. She's in one of her best dresses, sky blue with embroidery in white along the edges of the veil: flow-ers and fretwork. Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreathe

herself in flowers. No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can't use them anymore, you're withered. They're the genital organs of plants. I read that somewhere, once.

She makes her way to her chair and footstool, turns, lowers herself, lands ungracefully. She hoists her left foot onto the stool, fumbles in her sleeve pocket. I can hear the rustling, the click of her lighter, I smell the hot singe of the smoke, breathe it in.

"Late as usual," she says. We don't answer. There's a clatter as she gropes on the lamp table, then a click, and the television set runs through its warm-up.

A male choir, with greenish-yellow skin, the color needs adjusting; they're singing "Come to the Church in the Wildwood." *Come, come, come, come*, sing the basses. Serena clicks the channel changer. Waves, colored zigzags, a garble of sound: it's the Montreal satellite station, being blocked. Then there's a preacher, earnest, with shining dark eyes, leaning towards us across a desk. These days they look a lot like businessmen. Serena gives him a few seconds, then clicks onward.

Several blank channels, then the news. This is what she's been looking for. She leans back, inhales deeply. I on the contrary lean forward, a child being allowed up late with the grown-ups. This is the one good thing about these evenings, the evenings of the Ceremony: I'm allowed to watch the news. It seems to be an unspoken rule in this household: we always get here on time, he's always late, Serena always lets us watch the news.

Such as it is: who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none.

First, the front lines. They are not lines, really: the war seems to be going on in many places at once.

Wooded hills, seen from above, the trees a sickly yellow. I wish she'd fix the color. The Appalachian Highlands, says the voice-over, where the Angels of the Apocalypse, Fourth Division, are smoking out a pocket of Baptist guerillas, with air support from the Twenty-first Battalion of the Angels of Light. We are shown two helicopters, black ones with silver wings painted on the sides. Below them, a clump of trees explodes.

Now a close shot of a prisoner, with a stubbled and dirty face, flanked by two Angels in their neat black uniforms. The prisoner

accepts a cigarette from one of the Angels, puts it awkwardly to his lips with his bound hands. He gives a lopsided little grin. The announcer is saying something, but I don't hear it: I look into this man's eyes, trying to decide what he's thinking. He knows the camera is on him: is the grin a show of defiance, or is it submission? Is he embarrassed, at having been caught?

They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news? Possibly he's an actor.

The anchorman comes on now. His manner is kindly, fatherly; he gazes out at us from the screen, looking, with his tan and his white hair and candid eyes, wise wrinkles around them, like everybody's ideal grandfather. What he's telling us, his level smile implies, is for our own good. Everything will be all right soon. I promise. There will be peace. You must trust. You must go to sleep, like good children.

He tells us what we long to believe. He's very convincing.

I struggle against him. He's like an old movie star, I tell myself, with false teeth and a face job. At the same time I sway towards him, like one hypnotized. If only it were true. If only I could believe.

Now he's telling us that an underground espionage ring has been cracked by a team of Eyes, working with an inside informant. The ring has been smuggling precious national resources over the border into Canada.

"Five members of the heretical sect of Quakers have been arrested," he says, smiling blandly, "and more arrests are anticipated."

Two of the Quakers appear onscreen, a man and a woman. They look terrified, but they're trying to preserve some dignity in front of the camera. The man has a large dark mark on his forehead; the woman's veil has been torn off, and her hair falls in strands over her face. Both of them are about fifty.

Now we can see a city, again from the air. This used to be Detroit. Under the voice of the announcer there's the thump of artillery. From the skyline columns of smoke ascend.

"Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule," says the reassuring pink face, back on the screen. "Three thousand have arrived this week in National Homeland One, with another two thousand in transit." How are they transporting that

many people at once? Trains, buses? We are not shown any pictures of this. National Homeland One is in North Dakota. Lord knows what they're supposed to do, once they get there. Farm, is the theory.

Serena Joy has had enough of the news. Impatiently she clicks the button for a station change, comes up with an aging bass baritone, his cheeks like emptied udders. "Whispering Hope" is what he's singing. Serena turns him off.

We wait, the clock in the hall ticks, Serena lights another cigarette, I get into the car. It's a Saturday morning, it's a September, we still have a car. Other people have had to sell theirs. My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark.

It's a Saturday morning in September, I'm wearing my shining name. The little girl who is now dead sits in the back seat, with her two best dolls, her stuffed rabbit, mangy with age and love. I know all the details. They are sentimental details but I can't help that. I can't think about the rabbit too much though, I can't start to cry, here on the Chinese rug, breathing in the smoke that has been inside Serena's body. Not here, not now, I can do that later.

She thought we were going on a picnic, and in fact there is a picnic basket on the back seat, beside her, with real food in it, hard-boiled eggs, thermos and all. We didn't want her to know where we were really going, we didn't want her to tell, by mistake, reveal anything, if we were stopped. We didn't want to lay upon her the burden of our truth.

I wore my hiking boots, she had on her sneakers. The laces of the sneakers had a design of hearts on them, red, purple, pink, and yellow. It was warm for the time of year, the leaves were turning already, some of them; Luke drove, I sat beside him, the sun shone, the sky was blue, the houses as we passed them looked comforting

and ordinary, each house as it was left behind vanishing into past time, crumbling in an instant as if it had never been, because I would never see it again, or so I thought then.

We have almost nothing with us, we don't want to look as if we're going anywhere far or permanent. We have the forged passports, guaranteed, worth the price. We couldn't pay in money, of course, or put it on the Compuaccount: we used other things, some jewelry that was my grandmother's, a stamp collection Luke inherited from his uncle. Such things can be exchanged, for money, in other countries. When we get to the border we'll pretend we're just going over on a day trip; the fake visas are for a day. Before that I'll give her a sleeping pill so she'll be asleep when we cross. That way she won't betray us. You can't expect a child to lie convincingly.

And I don't want her to feel frightened, to feel the fear that is now tightening my muscles, tensing my spine, pulling me so taut that I'm certain I would break if touched. Every stoplight is an ordeal. We'll spend the night at a motel, or, better, sleeping in the car on a side road so there will be no suspicious questions. We'll cross in the morning, drive over the bridge, easily, just like driving to the supermarket.

We turn onto the freeway, head north, flowing with not much traffic. Since the war started, gas is expensive and in short supply. Outside the city we pass the first checkpoint. All they want is a look at the license, Luke does it well. The license matches the passport: we thought of that.

Back on the road, he squeezes my hand, glances over at me. You're white as a sheet, he says.

That is how I feel: white, flat, thin. I feel transparent. Surely they will be able to see through me. Worse, how will I be able to hold on to Luke, to her, when I'm so flat, so white? I feel as if there's not much left of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes. *Don't think that way, Moira would say. Think that way and you'll make it happen.*

Cheer up, says Luke. He's driving a little too fast now. The adrenaline's gone to his head. Now he's singing. Oh what a beautiful morning, he sings.

Even his singing worries me. We've been warned not to look too happy.

The Commander knocks at the door. The knock is prescribed: the sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory, he's supposed to ask permission to enter it. She likes to keep him waiting. It's a little thing, but in this household little things mean a lot. Tonight, however, she doesn't even get that, because before Serena Joy can speak he steps forward into the room anyway. Maybe he's just forgotten the protocol, but maybe it's deliberate. Who knows what she said to him, over the silver-encrusted dinner table? Or didn't say.

The Commander has on his black uniform, in which he looks like a museum guard. A semiretired man, genial but wary, killing time. But only at first glance. After that he looks like a midwestern bank president, with his straight neatly brushed silver hair, his sober posture, shoulders a little stooped. And after that there is his mustache, silver also, and after that his chin, which really you can't miss. When you get down as far as the chin he looks like a vodka ad, in a glossy magazine, of times gone by.

His manner is mild, his hands large, with thick fingers and acquisitive thumbs, his blue eyes uncommunicative, falsely innocuous. He looks us over as if taking inventory. One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green, standing, a solitary

man, thin-faced, in the background. He manages to appear puzzled, as if he can't quite remember how we all got in here. As if we are something he inherited, like a Victorian pump organ, and he hasn't figured out what to do with us. What we are worth.

He nods in the general direction of Serena Joy, who does not make a sound. He crosses to the large leather chair reserved for him, takes the key out of his pocket, fumbles with the ornate brass-bound leather-covered box that stands on the table beside the chair. He inserts the key, opens the box, lifts out the Bible, an ordinary copy, with a black cover and gold-edged pages. The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It's an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story.

The Commander sits down and crosses his legs, watched by us. The bookmarks are in place. He opens the book. He clears his throat a little, as if embarrassed.

"Could I have a drink of water?" he says to the air. "Please," he adds.

Behind me, one of them, Cora or Rita, leaves her space in the tableau and pads off towards the kitchen. The Commander sits, looking down. The Commander sighs, takes out a pair of reading glasses from his inside jacket pocket, gold rims, slips them on. Now he looks like a shoemaker in an old fairy-tale book. Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence?

We watch him: every inch, every flicker.

To be a man, watched by women. It must be entirely strange. To have them watching him all the time. To have them wondering, What's he going to do next? To have them flinch when he moves, even if it's a harmless enough move, to reach for an ashtray perhaps. To have them sizing him up. To have them thinking, He can't do it, he won't do, he'll have to do, this last as if he were a garment, out of style or shoddy, which must nevertheless be put on because there's nothing else available.

To have them putting him on, trying him on, trying him out, while he himself puts them on, like a sock over a foot, onto the stub

of himself, his extra, sensitive thumb, his tentacle, his delicate, stalked slug's eye, which extrudes, expands, winces, and shrivels back into himself when touched wrongly, grows big again, bulging a little at the tip, traveling forward as if along a leaf, into them, avid for vision. To achieve vision in this way, this journey into a darkness that is composed of women, a woman, who can see in darkness while he himself strains blindly forward.

She watches him from within. We're all watching him. It's the one thing we can really do, and it is not for nothing: if he were to falter, fall, or die, what would become of us? No wonder he's like a boot, hard on the outside, giving shape to a pulp of tenderfoot. That's just a wish. I've been watching him for some time and he's given no evidence, of softness.

But watch out, Commander, I tell him in my head. I've got my eye on you. One false move and I'm dead.

Still, it must be hell, to be a man, like that.

It must be just fine.

It must be hell.

It must be very silent.

The water appears, the Commander drinks it. "Thank you," he says. Cora rustles back into place.

The Commander pauses, looking down, scanning the page. He takes his time, as if unconscious of us. He's like a man toying with a steak, behind a restaurant window, pretending not to see the eyes watching him from hungry darkness not three feet from his elbow. We lean towards him a little, iron filings to his magnet. He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once.

The Commander, as if reluctantly, begins to read. He isn't very good at it. Maybe he's merely bored.

It's the usual story, the usual stories. God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.* Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who bath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Bebold my maid Bilbab. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast, as we sat in the high

school cafeteria, eating porridge with cream and brown sugar. You're getting the best, you know, said Aunt Lydia. There's a war on, things are rationed. You are spoiled girls, she twinkled, as if rebuking a kitten. Naughty puss.

For lunch it was the Beatitudes. Blessed be this, blessed be that. They played it from a tape, so not even an Aunt would be guilty of the sin of reading. The voice was a man's. *Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent.* I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking. *Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

Nobody said when.

I check the clock, during dessert, canned pears with cinnamon, standard for lunch, and look for Moira in her place, two tables over. She's gone already. I put my hand up, I am excused. We don't do this too often, and always at different times of day.

In the washroom I go to the second-last stall, as usual.

Are you there? I whisper.

Large as life and twice as ugly, Moira whispers back.

What have you heard? I ask her.

Nothing much. I've got to get out of here, I'm going bats.

I feel panic. No, no, Moira, I say, don't try it. Not on your own.

I'll fake sick. They send an ambulance, I've seen it.

You'll only get as far as the hospital.

At least it'll be a change. I won't have to listen to that old bitch.

They'll find you out.

Not to worry, I'm good at it. When I was a kid in high school I cut out vitamin C, I got scurvy. In the early stages they can't diagnose it. Then you just start it again and you're fine. I'll hide my vitamin pills.

Moira, don't.

I couldn't stand the thought of her not being here, with me. For me.

They send two guys with you, in the ambulance. Think about it. They must be starved for it, shit, they aren't even allowed to put their hands in their pockets, the possibilities are —

You in there. Time's up, said the voice of Aunt Elizabeth, from

the doorway. I stood up, flushed the toilet. Two of Moira's fingers appeared, through the hole in the wall. It was only large enough for two fingers. I touched my own fingers to them, quickly, held on. Let go.

"And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband," says the Commander. He lets the book fall closed. It makes an exhausted sound, like a padded door shutting, by itself, at a distance: a puff of air. The sound suggests the softness of the thin oniony pages, how they would feel under the fingers. Soft and dry, like *papier poudre*, pink and powdery, from the time before, you'd get it in booklets for taking the shine off your nose, in those stores that sold candles and soap in the shapes of things: seashells, mushrooms. Like cigarette paper. Like petals.

The Commander sits with his eyes closed for a moment, as if tired. He works long hours. He has a lot of responsibilities.

Serena has begun to cry. I can hear her, behind my back. It isn't the first time. She always does this, the night of the Ceremony. She's trying not to make a noise. She's trying to preserve her dignity, in front of us. The upholstery and the rugs muffle her but we can hear her clearly despite that. The tension between her lack of control and her attempt to suppress it is horrible. It's like a fart in church. I feel, as always, the urge to laugh, but not because I think it's funny. The smell of her crying spreads over us and we pretend to ignore it.

The Commander opens his eyes, notices, frowns, ceases to notice. "Now we will have a moment of silent prayer," says the Commander. "We will ask for a blessing, and for success in all our ventures."

I bow my head and close my eyes. I listen to the held breath, the almost inaudible gasps, the shaking going on behind my back. How she must hate me, I think.

I pray silently: *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. I don't know what it means, but it sounds right, and it will have to do, because I don't know what else I can say to God. Not right now. Not, as they used to say, at this juncture. The scratched writing on my cupboard wall

floats before me, left by an unknown woman, with the face of Moira. I saw her go out, to the ambulance, on a stretcher, carried by two Angels.

What is it? I mouthed to the woman beside me; safe enough, a question like that, to all but a fanatic.

A fever, she formed with her lips. Appendicitis, they say. I was having dinner, that evening, hamburger balls and hashed browns. My table was near the window, I could see out, as far as the front gates. I saw the ambulance come back, no siren this time. One of the Angels jumped out, talked with the guard. The guard went into the building; the ambulance stayed parked; the Angel stood with his back towards us, as they had been taught to do. Two of the Aunts came out of the building, with the guard. They went around to the back. They hauled Moira out, dragged her in through the gate and up the front steps, holding her under the armpits, one on each side. She was having trouble walking. I stopped eating, I couldn't eat; by this time all of us on my side of the table were staring out the window. The window was greenish, with that chicken wire mesh they used to put inside glass. Aunt Lydia said, Eat your dinner. She went over and pulled down the blind.

They took her into the room that used to be the Science Lab. It was a room where none of us ever went willingly. Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential.

Moira lay on her bed, an example. She shouldn't have tried it, not with the Angels, Alma said, from the next bed over. We had to carry her to classes. We stole extra paper packets of sugar for her, from the cafeteria at mealtimes, smuggled them to her, at night, handing them from bed to bed. Probably she didn't need the sugar but it was the only thing we could find to steal. To give.

I am still praying but what I am seeing is Moira's feet, the way they looked after they'd brought her back. Her feet did not look like feet at all. They looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless, except for the color. They looked like lungs.

Oh God, I pray. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*
Is this what you had in mind?

The Commander clears his throat. This is what he does to let us know that in his opinion it's time we stopped praying. "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to know himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect towards him," he says.

It's the sign-off. He stands up. We are dismissed.

16

The Ceremony goes as usual.

I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers. What I could see, if I were to open my eyes, would be the large white canopy of Serena Joy's outsized colonial-style four-poster bed, suspended like a sagging cloud above us, a cloud sprigged with tiny drops of silver rain, which, if you looked at them closely, would turn out to be four-petaled flowers. I would not see the carpet, which is white, or the sprigged curtains and skirted dressing table with its silver-backed brush and mirror set; only the canopy, which manages to suggest at one and the same time, by the gauziness of its fabric and its heavy downward curve, both etherality and matter.

Or the sail of a ship. Big-bellied sails, they used to say, in poems. Bellying. Propelled forward by a swollen belly.

A mist of Lily of the Valley surrounds us, chilly, crisp almost. It's not warm in this room.

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed.

My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of

hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge.

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose.

Therefore I lie still and picture the unseen canopy over my head. I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter: *Close your eyes and think of England*. But this is not England. I wish he would hurry up.

Maybe I'm crazy and this is some new kind of therapy.

I wish it were true; then I could get better and this would go away.

Serena Joy grips my hands as if it is she, not I, who's being fucked, as if she finds it either pleasurable or painful, and the Commander fucks, with a regular two-four marching stroke, on and on like a tap dripping. He is preoccupied, like a man humming to himself in the shower without knowing he's humming; like a man who has other things on his mind. It's as if he's somewhere else, waiting for himself to come, drumming his fingers on the table while he waits. There's an impatience in his rhythm now. But isn't this everyone's wet dream, two women at once? They used to say that. Exciting, they used to say.

What's going on in this room, under Serena Joy's silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena. Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely, like jazz garters or beauty spots: superfluous distractions for the light-minded. Outdated. It seems odd that women once spent such time and energy reading about such things, thinking about them, worrying about them, writing about them. They are so obviously recreational.

This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty.

If I were going to open my eyes a slit, I would be able to see him, his not-unpleasant face hanging over my torso, with a few strands of his silver hair falling perhaps over his forehead, intent on his inner journey, that place he is hurrying towards, which recedes as in a dream at the same speed with which he approaches it. I would see his open eyes.

If he were better looking would I enjoy this more?

At least he's an improvement on the previous one, who smelled like a church cloakroom in the rain; like your mouth when the dentist starts picking at your teeth; like a nostril. The Commander, instead, smells of mothballs, or is this odor some punitive form of aftershave? Why does he have to wear that stupid uniform? But would I like his white, tufted raw body any better?

Kissing is forbidden between us. This makes it bearable.

One detaches oneself. One describes.

He comes at last, with a stifed groan as of relief. Serena Joy, who has been holding her breath, expels it. The Commander, who has been propping himself on his elbows, away from our combined bodies, doesn't permit himself to sink down into us. He rests a moment, withdraws, recedes, rezippers. He nods, then turns and leaves the room, closing the door with exaggerated care behind him, as if both of us are his ailing mother. There's something hilarious about this, but I don't dare laugh.

Serena Joy lets go of my hands. "You can get up now," she says. "Get up and get out." She's supposed to have me rest, for ten minutes, with my feet on a pillow to improve the chances. This is meant to be a time of silent meditation for her, but she's not in the mood for that. There is loathing in her voice, as if the touch of my flesh sickens and contaminates her. I untangle myself from her body, stand up; the juice of the Commander runs down my legs. Before I turn away I see her straighten her blue skirt, clench her legs together; she continues lying on the bed, gazing up at the canopy above her, stiff and straight as an effigy.

Which of us is it worse for, her or me?

believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire. We have ceremonies of our own, private ones.

The butter is greasy and it will go rancid and I will smell like an old cheese; but at least it's organic, as they used to say.

To such devices have we descended.

Buttered, I lie on my single bed, flat, like a piece of toast. I can't sleep. In the semidark I stare up at the blind plaster eye in the middle of the ceiling, which stares back down at me, even though it can't see. There's no breeze, my white curtains are like gauze bandages, hanging limp, glimmering in the aura cast by the searchlight that illuminates this house at night, or is there a moon?

I fold back the sheet, get carefully up, on silent bare feet, in my nightgown, go to the window, like a child, I want to see. The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow. The sky is clear but hard to make out, because of the searchlight; but yes, in the obscured sky a moon does float, newly, a wishing moon, a sliver of ancient rock, a goddess, a wink. The moon is a stone and the sky is full of deadly hardware, but oh God, how beautiful anyway.

I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me.

I want to steal something.

In the hall the night-light's on, the long space glows gently pink, I walk, one foot set carefully down, then the other, without creaking, along the runner, as if on a forest floor, sneaking, my heart quick, through the night house. I am out of place. This is entirely illegal.

Down past the fish-eye on the hall wall, I can see my white shape, of tented body, hair down my back like a mane, my eyes gleaming. I like this. I am doing something, on my own. The active, is it a tense? Tensed. What I would like to steal is a knife, from the kitchen, but I'm not ready for that.

I reach the sitting room, door's ajar, slip in, leave the door a little open. A squeak of wood, but who's near enough to hear? I stand in the room, letting the pupils of my eyes dilate, like a cat's or owl's.

This is what I do when I'm back in my room:
I take off my clothes and put on my nightgown.

I look for the pat of butter, in the toe of my right shoe, where I hid it after dinner. The cupboard was too warm, the butter is semi-liquid. Much of it has sunk into the paper napkin I wrapped it in. Now I'll have butter in my shoe. Not the first time, because whenever there is butter or even margarine, I save some in this way. I can get most of the butter off the shoe lining, with a washcloth or some toilet paper from the bathroom, tomorrow.

I rub the butter over my face, work it into the skin of my hands. There's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. Such things are considered vanities. We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut. This was a decree of the Wives, this absence of hand lotion. They don't want us to look attractive. For them, things are bad enough as it is.

The butter is a trick I learned at the Rachel and Leah Center. The Red Center, we called it, because there was so much red. My predecessor in this room, my friend with the freckles and the good laugh, must have done this too, this buttering. We all do it.

As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can

Old perfume, cloth dust fill my nostrils. There's a slight mist of light, coming through the cracks around the closed drapes, from the searchlight outside, where two men doubtless patrol, I've seen them, from above, from behind my curtains, dark shapes, cutouts. Now I can see outlines, gleams: from the mirror, the bases of the lamps, the vases, the sofa looming like a cloud at dusk.

What should I take? Something that will not be missed. In the wood at midnight, a magic flower. A withered daffodil, not one from the dried arrangement. The daffodils will soon be thrown out, they're beginning to smell. Along with Serena's stale fumes, the stench of her knitting.

I grope, find an end table, feel. There's a clink, I must have knocked something. I find the daffodils, crisp at the edges where they've dried, limp towards the stems, use my fingers to pinch. I will press this, somewhere. Under the mattress. Leave it there, for the next woman, the one who comes after me, to find.

But there's someone in the room, behind me.

I hear the step, quiet as mine, the creaking of the same floorboard. The door closes behind me, with a little click, cutting the light. I freeze: white was a mistake. I'm snow in moonlight, even in the dark.

Then a whisper: "Don't scream. It's all right."

As if I'd scream, as if it's all right. I turn: a shape, that's all, dull glint of cheekbone, devoid of color.

He steps towards me. Nick.

"What are you doing in here?"

I don't answer. He too is illegal, here, with me, he can't give me away. Nor I him; for the moment we're mirrors. He puts his hand on my arm, pulls me against him, his mouth on mine, what else comes from such denial? Without a word. Both of us shaking, how I'd like to. In Serena's parlor, with the dried flowers, on the Chinese carpet, his thin body. A man entirely unknown. It would be like shouting, it would be like shooting someone. My hand goes down, how about that, I could unbutton, and then. But it's too dangerous, he knows it, we push each other away, not far. Too much trust, too much risk, too much already.

"I was coming to find you," he says, breathes, almost into my ear. I want to reach up, taste his skin, he makes me hungry. His

fingers move, feeling my arm under the nightgown sleeve, as if his hand won't listen to reason. It's so good, to be touched by someone, to be felt so greedily, to feel so greedy. Luke, you'd know, you'd understand. It's you here, in another body.

Bullshit.

"Why?" I say. Is it so bad, for him, that he'd take the risk of coming to my room at night? I think of the hanged men, hooked on the Wall. I can hardly stand up. I have to get away, back to the stairs, before I dissolve entirely. His hand's on my shoulder now, held still, heavy, pressing down on me like warm lead. Is this what I would die for? I'm a coward, I hate the thought of pain.

"He told me to," Nick says. "He wants to see you. In his office."

"What do you mean?" I say. The Commander, it must be. See me? What does he mean by see? Hasn't he had enough of me?

"Tomorrow," he says, just audible. In the dark parlor we move away from each other, slowly, as if pulled towards each other by a force, current, pulled apart also by hands equally strong.

I find the door, turn the knob, fingers on cool porcelain, open. It's all I can do.

I lie in bed, still trembling. You can wet the rim of a glass and run your finger around the rim and it will make a sound. This is what I feel like: this sound of glass. I feel like the word *shatter*. I want to be with someone.

Lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly. The three of us, in bed, she kicking, turning over within me. Thunderstorm outside the window, that's why she's awake, they can hear, they sleep, they can be startled, even there in the soothing of the heart, like waves on the shore around them. A flash of lightning, quite close, Luke's eyes go white for an instant.

I'm not frightened. We're wide awake, the rain hits now, we will be slow and careful.

If I thought this would never happen again I would die.

But this is wrong, nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from. There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere. Who knows where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person.

From time to time I can see their faces, against the dark, flickering like the images of saints, in old foreign cathedrals, in the light

of the drafty candles; candles you would light to pray by, kneeling, your forehead against the wooden railing, hoping for an answer. I can conjure them but they are mirages only, they don't last. Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied. I can listen to my own heartbeat against the bedsprings, I can stroke myself, under the dry white sheets, in the dark, but I too am dry and white, hard, granular; it's like running my hand over a plateful of dried rice; it's like snow. There's something dead about it, something deserted. I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor.

Here is what I believe.

I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket, a tangle of bracken, the brown fronds from last year under the green ones just unrolled, or ground hemlock perhaps, although it's too early for the red berries. What is left of him: his hair, the bones, the plaid wool shirt, green and black, the leather belt, the work boots. I know exactly what he was wearing. I can see his clothes in my mind, bright as a lithograph or a full-color advertisement, from an ancient magazine, though not his face, not so well. His face is beginning to fade, possibly because it wasn't always the same: his face had different expressions, his clothes did not.

I pray that the hole, or two or three, there was more than one shot, they were close together, I pray that at least one hole is neatly, quickly, and finally through the skull, through the place where all the pictures were, so that there would have been only the one flash, of darkness or pain, dull I hope, like the word *ibud*, only the one and then silence.

I believe this.

I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, gray cement, on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair. God knows what he's wearing, God knows what they've put him in. God isn't the only one who knows, so maybe there could be some way of finding out. He hasn't shaved for a year, though they cut his hair short, whenever they feel like it, for lice they say. I'll have to revise that: if they cut the hair for lice, they'd cut the beard too. You'd think.

Anyway, they don't do it well, the hair is ragged, the back of his neck is nicked, that's hardly the worst, he looks ten years older, twenty, he's bent like an old man, his eyes are pouched, small purple veins have burst in his cheeks, there's a scar, no, a wound, it isn't yet healed, the color of tulips, near the stem end, down the left side of his face where the flesh split recently. The body is so easily damaged, so easily disposed of, water and chemicals is all it is, hardly more to it than a jellyfish, drying on sand.

He finds it painful to move his hands, painful to move. He doesn't know what he's accused of. A problem. There must be something, some accusation. Otherwise why are they keeping him, why isn't he already dead? He must know something they want to know. I can't imagine. I can't imagine he hasn't already said whatever it is. I would.

He is surrounded by a smell, his own, the smell of a cooped-up animal in a dirty cage. I imagine him resting, because I can't bear to imagine him at any other time, just as I can't imagine anything below his collar, above his cuffs. I don't want to think what they've done to his body. Does he have shoes? No, and the floor is cold and wet. Does he know I'm here, alive, that I'm thinking about him? I have to believe so. In reduced circumstances you have to believe all kinds of things. I believe in thought transference now, vibrations in the ether, that sort of junk. I never used to.

I also believe that they didn't catch him or catch up with him after all, that he made it, reached the bank, swam the river, crossed the border, dragged himself up on the far shore, an island, teeth chattering; found his way to a nearby farmhouse, was allowed in, with suspicion at first, but then when they understood who he was, they were friendly, not the sort who would turn him in, perhaps they were Quakers, they will smuggle him inland, from house to house, the woman made him some hot coffee and gave him a set of her husband's clothes. I picture the clothes. It comforts me to dress him warmly.

He made contact with the others, there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light. There must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from, on the television?

Any day now there may be a message from him. It will come in the most unexpected way, from the least likely person, someone I never would have suspected. Under my plate, on the dinner tray? Slipped into my hand as I reach the tokens across the counter in All Flesh?

The message will say that I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her, wherever they've put her. She'll remember us and we will be all three of us together. Meanwhile I must endure, keep myself safe for later. What has happened to me, what's happening to me now, won't make any difference to him, he loves me anyway, he knows it isn't my fault. The message will say that also. It's this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive. I believe in the message.

The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it.

This also is a belief of mine. This also may be untrue.

One of the gravestones in the cemetery near the earliest church has an anchor on it and an hourglass, and the words *In Hope*.

In Hope. Why did they put that above a dead person? Was it the corpse hoping, or those still alive?

Does Luke hope?

VIII

Birth Day

I'm dreaming that I am awake.

I dream that I get out of bed and walk across the room, not this room, and go out the door, not this door. I'm at home, one of my homes, and she's running to meet me, in her small green nightgown with the sunflower on the front, her feet bare, and I pick her up and feel her arms and legs go around me and I begin to cry, because I know then that I'm not awake. I'm back in this bed, trying to wake up, and I wake up and sit on the edge of the bed, and my mother comes in with a tray and asks me if I'm feeling better. When I was sick, as a child, she had to stay home from work. But I'm not awake this time either.

After these dreams I do awake, and I know I'm really awake because there is the wreath, on the ceiling, and my curtains hanging like drowned white hair. I feel drugged. I consider this: maybe they're drugging me. Maybe the life I think I'm living is a paranoid delusion.

Not a hope. I know where I am, and who, and what day it is. These are the tests, and I am sane. Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes.

* * *

Grayness comes through the curtains, hazy bright, not much sun today. I get out of bed, go to the window, kneel on the window seat, the hard little cushion, FAITH, and look out. There is nothing to be seen.

I wonder what has become of the other two cushions. There must have been three, once. HOPE and CHARITY, where have they been stowed? Serena Joy has tidy habits. She wouldn't throw away anything not quite worn out. One for Rita, one for Cora? The bell goes, I'm up before it, ahead of time. I dress, not looking down.

I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.

These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself.

In front of me is a tray, and on the tray are a glass of apple juice, a vitamin pill, a spoon, a plate with three slices of brown toast on it, a small dish containing honey, and another plate with an eggcup on it, the kind that looks like a woman's torso, in a skirt. Under the skirt is the second egg, being kept warm. The eggcup is white china with a blue stripe.

The first egg is white. I move the eggcup a little, so it's now in the watery sunlight that comes through the window and falls, brightening, waning, brightening again, on the tray. The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon. It's a barren landscape, yet perfect; it's the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside.

The egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure.

The sun goes and the egg fades.

I pick the egg out of the cup and finger it for a moment. It's warm. Women used to carry such eggs between their breasts, to incubate them. That would have felt good.

The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg. Blessings that can be

counted, on the fingers of one hand. But possibly this is how I am expected to react. If I have an egg, what more can I want?

In reduced circumstances the desire to live attaches itself to strange objects. I would like a pet: a bird, say, or a cat. A familiar. Anything at all familiar. A rat would do, in a pinch, but there's no chance of that. This house is too clean.

I slice the top off the egg with the spoon, and eat the contents.

While I'm eating the second egg, I hear the siren, at a great distance at first, winding its way towards me among the large houses and clipped lawns, a thin sound like the hum of an insect; then nearing, opening out, like a flower of sound opening, into a trumpet. A proclamation, this siren. I put down my spoon, my heart speeds up, I go to the window again: will it be blue and not for me? But I see it turn the corner, come along the street, stop in front of the house, still blaring, and it's red. Joy to the world, rare enough these days. I leave the second egg half eaten, hurry to the closet for my cloak, and already I can hear feet on the stairs and the voices calling.

"Hurry," says Cora, "won't wait all day," and she helps me on with the cloak, she's actually smiling.

I almost run down the hall, the stairs are like skiing, the front door is wide, today I can go through it, and the Guardian stands there, saluting. It's started to rain, a drizzle, and the gravid smell of earth and grass fills the air.

The red Birthmobile is parked in the driveway. Its back door is open and I clamber in. The carpet on the floor is red, red curtains are drawn over the windows. There are three women in here already, sitting on the benches that run the length of the van on either side. The Guardian closes and locks the double doors and climbs into the front, beside the driver; through the glassed-over wire grille we can see the backs of their heads. We start with a lurch, while overhead the siren screams: *Make way, make way!*

"Who is it?" I say to the woman next to me; into her ear, or where her ear must be under the white headdress. I almost have to shout, the noise is so loud.

"Ofwarren," she shouts back. Impulsively she grabs my hand, squeezes it, as we lurch around the corner; she turns to me and I

see her face, there are tears running down her cheeks, but tears of what? Envy, disappointment? But no, she's laughing, she throws her arms around me, I've never seen her before, she hugs me, she has large breasts, under the red habit, she wipes her sleeve across her face. On this day we can do anything we want.

I revise that: within limits.

Across from us on the other bench, one woman is praying, eyes closed, hands up to her mouth. Or she may not be praying. She may be biting her thumbnails. Possibly she's trying to keep calm. The third woman is calm already, she sits with her arms folded, smiling a little. The siren goes on and on. That used to be the sound of death, for ambulances or fires. Possibly it will be the sound of death today also. We will soon know. What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby, as we all hope? Or something else, an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet? There's no telling. They could tell once, with machines, but that is now outlawed. What would be the point of knowing, anyway? You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term.

The chances are one in four, we learned that at the Center. The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would die of eating you. Maybe you light up in the dark, like an old-fashioned watch. Deathwatch. That's a kind of beetle, it buries carrion.

I can't think of myself, my body, sometimes, without seeing the skeleton: how I must appear to an electron. A cradle of life, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass. Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody's fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mold could touch. Some did it themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals. How could they, said Aunt Lydia, oh how could they have done such a thing? Jezebels! Scorning God's gifts! Wringing her hands.

It's a risk you're taking, said Aunt Lydia, but you are the shock troops, you will march out in advance, into dangerous territory. The greater the risk the greater the glory. She clasped her hands, radiant with our phony courage. We looked down at the tops of our desks. To go through all that and give birth to a shredder: it wasn't a fine thought. We didn't know exactly what would happen to the babies that didn't get passed, that were declared Unbabies. But we knew they were put somewhere, quickly, away.

There was no one cause, says Aunt Lydia. She stands at the front of the room, in her khaki dress, a pointer in her hand. Pulled down in front of the blackboard, where once there would have been a map, is a graph, showing the birthrate per thousand, for years and years: a slippery slope, down past the zero line of replacement, and down and down.

Of course, some women believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode. That was the excuse they used, says Aunt Lydia. They said there was no sense in breeding. Aunt Lydia's nostrils narrow: such wickedness. They were lazy women, she says. They were sluts.

On the top of my desk there are initials, carved into the wood, and dates. The initials are sometimes in two sets, joined by the word *loves*. *J.H. loves B.P. 1954. O.R. loves L.T.* These seem to me like the inscriptions I used to read about, carved on the stone walls of caves, or drawn with a mixture of soot and animal fat. They seem to me incredibly ancient. The desk top is of blond wood; it slants down, and there is an armrest on the right side, to lean on when you were writing, on paper, with a pen. Inside the desk you could keep things: books, notebooks. These habits of former times appear to me now lavish, decadent almost; immoral, like the orgies of barbarian regimes. *M. loves G. 1972.* This carving, done with a pencil dug many times into the worn varnish of the desk, has the pathos of all vanished civilizations. It's like a handprint on stone. Whoever made that was once alive.

There are no dates after the mid-eighties. This must have been one of the schools that was closed down then, for lack of children.

They made mistakes, says Aunt Lydia. We don't intend to repeat them. Her voice is pious, condescending, the voice of those whose duty it is to tell us unpleasant things for our own good. I

would like to strangle her. I shove this thought away almost as soon as I think it.

A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. She is rich in pauses, which she savors in her mouth. Think of yourselves as pearls. We, sitting in our rows, eyes down, we make her salivate morally. We are hers to define, we must suffer her adjectives.

I think about pearls. Pearls are congealed oyster spit. This is what I will tell Moira, later, if I can.

All of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia, with satisfied good cheer.

The van stops, the back doors are opened, the Guardian herds us out. At the front door stands another Guardian, with one of those snubby machine guns slung over his shoulder. We file towards the front door, in the drizzle, the Guardians saluting. The big Emerge van, the one with the machines and the mobile doctors, is parked farther along the circular drive. I see one of the doctors looking out the window of the van. I wonder what they do in there, waiting. Play cards, most likely, or read; some masculine pursuit. Most of the time they aren't needed at all; they're only allowed in if it can't be helped.

It used to be different, they used to be in charge. A shame it was, said Aunt Lydia. Shameful. What she'd just showed us was a film, made in an olden-days hospital: a pregnant woman, wired up to a machine, electrodes coming out of her every which way so that she looked like a broken robot, an intravenous drip feeding into her arm. Some man with a searchlight looking up between her legs, where she'd been shaved, a mere beardless girl, a trayful of bright sterilized knives, everyone with masks on. A cooperative patient. Once they drugged women, induced labor, cut them open, sewed them up. No more. No anesthetics, even. Aunt Elizabeth said it was better for the baby, but also: *I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.* At lunch we got that, brown bread and lettuce sandwiches.

As I'm going up the steps, wide steps with a stone urn on either side — Ofwarren's Commander must be higher status than ours — I hear another siren. It's the blue Birthmobile, for Wives. That

will be Serena Joy, arriving in state. No benches for them, they get real seats, upholstery. They face front and are not curtained off. They know where they're going.

Probably Serena Joy has been here before, to this house, for tea. Probably Ofwarren, formerly that whiny bitch Janine, was paraded out in front of her, her and the other Wives, so they could see her belly, feel it perhaps, and congratulate the Wife. A strong girl, good muscles. No Agent Orange in her family, we checked the records, you can never be too careful. And perhaps one of the kinder ones: Would you like a cookie, dear?

Oh no, you'll spoil her, too much sugar is bad for them.

Surely one won't hurt, just this once, Mildred.

And sucky Janine: Oh yes, can I, ma'am, please?

Such a, so well behaved, not surly like some of them, do their job and that's that. More like a daughter to you, as you might say. One of the family. Comfortable matronly chuckles. That's all dear, you can go back to your room.

And after she's gone: Little whores, all of them, but still, you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls? That from the Commander's Wife, mine.

Oh, but you've been so *lucky*. Some of them, why, they aren't even clean. And won't give you a smile, mope in their rooms, don't wash their hair, the *smell*. I have to get the Marthas to do it, almost have to hold her down in the bathtub, you practically have to bribe her to get her to take a bath even, you have to threaten her.

I had to take stern measures with mine, and now she doesn't eat her dinner properly; and as for the other thing, not a nibble, and we've been so regular. But yours, she's a credit to you. And any day now, oh, you must be so excited, she's big as a house, I bet you can hardly wait.

More tea? Modestly changing the subject.

I know the sort of thing that goes on.

And Janine, up in her room, what does she do? Sits with the taste of sugar still in her mouth, licking her lips. Stares out the window. Breathes in and out. Carresses her swollen breasts. Thinks of nothing.

The central staircase is wider than ours, with a curved banister on either side. From above I can hear the chanting of the women who are already there. We go up the stairs, single file, being careful not to step on the trailing hems of each other's dresses. To the left, the double doors to the dining room are folded back, and inside I can see the long table, covered with a white cloth and spread with a buffet: ham, cheese, oranges — they have oranges! — and fresh-baked breads and cakes. As for us, we'll get milk and sandwiches, on a tray, later. But they have a coffee urn, and bottles of wine, for why shouldn't the Wives get a little drunk on such a triumphant day? First they'll wait for the results, then they'll pig out. They're gathered in the sitting room on the other side of the stairway now, cheering on this Commander's Wife, the Wife of Warren. A small thin woman, she lies on the floor, in a white cotton nightgown, her graying hair spreading like mildew over the rug; they massage her tiny belly, just as if she's really about to give birth herself.

The Commander, of course, is nowhere in sight. He's gone wherever men go on such occasions, some hideout. Probably he's figuring out when his promotion is likely to be announced, if all goes well. He's sure to get one, now.

Ofwarren is in the master bedroom, a good name for it; where

this Commander and his Wife nightly bed down. She's sitting on their king-size bed, propped with pillows: Janine, inflated but reduced, shorn of her former name. She's wearing a white cotton shift, which is hiked up over her thighs; her long broom-colored hair is pulled back and tied behind her head, to keep it out of the way. Her eyes are squeezed closed, and this way I can almost like her. After all, she's one of us; what did she ever want but to lead her life as agreeably as possible? What else did any of us want? It's the *possible* that's the catch. She's not doing badly, under the circumstances.

Two women I don't know stand on either side of her, gripping her hands, or she theirs. A third lifts the nightgown, pours baby oil onto her mound of stomach, rubs downward. At her feet stands Aunt Elizabeth, in her khaki dress with the military breast pockets; she was the one who taught Gyn Ed. All I can see of her is the side of her head, her profile, but I know it's her, that jutting nose and handsome chin, severe. At her side stands the Birthing Stool, with its double seat, the back one raised like a throne behind the other. They won't put Janine on it before it's time. The blankets stand ready, the small tub for bathing, the bowl of ice for Janine to suck.

The rest of the women sit cross-legged on the rug; there's a crowd of them, everyone in this district is supposed to be here. There must be twenty-five, thirty. Not every Commander has a Handmaid: some of their Wives have children. *From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs.* We recited that, three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts.

You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts.

She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way.

She said: Because they won't want things they can't have.

Once a week we had movies, after lunch and before our nap. We sat on the floor of the Domestic Science room, on our little gray mats, and waited while Aunt Helena and Aunt Lydia struggled

with the projection equipment. If we were lucky they wouldn't get the film threaded upside-down. What it reminded me of was geography classes, at my own high school thousands of years before, where they showed movies of the rest of the world; women in long skirts or cheap printed cotton dresses, carrying bundles of sticks, or baskets, or plastic buckets of water, from some river or other, with babies slung on them in shawls or net slings, looking squint-eyed or afraid out of the screen at us, knowing something was being done to them by a machine with one glass eye but not knowing what. Those movies were comforting and faintly boring. They made me feel sleepy, even when men came onto the screen, with naked muscles, hacking away at hard dirt with primitive hoes and shovels, hauling rocks. I preferred movies with dancing in them, singing, ceremonial masks, carved artifacts for making music: feathers, brass buttons, conch shells, drums. I liked watching these people when they were happy, not when they were miserable, starving, emaciated, straining themselves to death over some simple thing, the digging of a well, the irrigation of land, problems the civilized nations had long ago solved. I thought someone should just give them the technology and let them get on with it.

Aunt Lydia didn't show these kinds of movies.

Sometimes the movie she showed would be an old porno film, from the seventies or eighties. Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out.

Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then. Her voice trembled with indignation.

Moira said later that it wasn't real, it was done with models; but it was hard to tell.

Sometimes, though, the movie would be what Aunt Lydia called an Unwoman documentary. Imagine, said Aunt Lydia, wasting their time like that, when they should have been doing something useful. Back then, the Unwomen were always wasting time. They were

encouraged to do it. The government gave them money to do that very thing. Mind you, some of their ideas were sound enough, she went on, with the smug authority in her voice of one who is in a position to judge. We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today. Only some, mind you, she said coyly, raising her index finger, wagging it at us. But they were Godless, and that can make all the difference, don't you agree?

I sit on my mat, hands folded, and Aunt Lydia steps to the side, away from the screen, and the lights go out, and I wonder whether I can, in the dark, lean far over to the right without being seen, and whisper, to the woman next to me. What will I whisper? I will say, Have you seen Moira. Because nobody has, she wasn't at breakfast. But the room, although dim, isn't dark enough, so I switch my mind into the holding pattern that passes for attention. They don't play the soundtrack, on movies like these, though they do on the porno films. They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once, but they don't want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying.

First come the title and some names, blacked out on the film with a crayon so we can't read them, and then I see my mother. My young mother, younger than I remember her, as young as she must have been once before I was born. She's wearing the kind of outfit Aunt Lydia told us was typical of Unwomen in those days, overall jeans with a green and mauve plaid shirt underneath and sneakers on her feet; the sort of thing Moira once wore, the sort of thing I can remember wearing, long ago, myself. Her hair is tucked into a mauve kerchief tied behind her head. Her face is very young, very serious, even pretty. I've forgotten my mother was once as pretty and as earnest as that. She's in a group of other women, dressed in the same fashion; she's holding a stick, no, it's part of a banner, the handle. The camera pans up and we see the writing, in paint, on what must have been a bedsheet: TAKE BACK THE NIGHT. This hasn't been blacked out, even though we aren't supposed to be reading. The women around me breathe in, there's a stirring in the room, like wind over grass. Is this an oversight, have we gotten away with something? Or is this a thing we're intended to see, to remind us of the old days of no safety?

Behind this sign there are other signs, and the camera notices them briefly: FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN'S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE? Under the last sign there's a line drawing of a woman's body, lying on a table, blood dripping out of it.

Now my mother is moving forward, she's smiling, laughing, they all move forward, and now they're raising their fists in the air. The camera moves to the sky, where hundreds of balloons rise, trailing their strings: red balloons, with a circle painted on them, a circle with a stem like the stem of an apple, the stem of a cross. Back on the earth, my mother is part of the crowd now, and I can't see her anymore.

I had you when I was thirty-seven, my mother said. It was a risk, you could have been deformed or something. You were a wanted child, all right, and did I get shit from some quarters! My oldest buddy Tricia Foreman accused me of being pronatalist, the bitch. Jealousy, I put that down to. Some of the others were okay though. But when I was six months' pregnant, a lot of them started sending me these articles about how the birth-defect rate went zooming up after thirty-five. Just what I needed. And stuff about how hard it was to be a single parent. Fuck that shit, I told them, I've started this and I'm going to finish it. At the hospital they wrote down "Aged Primipara" on the chart, I caught them in the act. That's what they call you when it's your first baby over thirty, over *thirty* for god-sake. Garbage, I told them, biologically I'm twenty-two, I could run rings around you any day. I could have triplets and walk out of here while you were still trying to get up off the bed.

When she said that she'd jut out her chin. I remember her like that, her chin jutted out, a drink in front of her on the kitchen table; not young and earnest and pretty the way she was in the movie, but wiry, spunky, the kind of old woman who won't let anyone butt in front of her in a supermarket line. She liked to come over to my house and have a drink while Luke and I were fixing dinner and tell us what was wrong with her life, which always turned into what was wrong with ours. Her hair was gray by that time, of course. She wouldn't dye it. Why pretend, she'd say. Anyway what

do I need it for, I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women. Not that your father wasn't a nice guy and all, but he wasn't up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. Just do the job, then you can bugger off, I said, I make a decent salary, I can afford daycare. So he went to the coast and sent Christmas cards. He had beautiful blue eyes though. But there's something missing in them, even the nice ones. It's like they're permanently absent-minded, like they can't quite remember who they are. They look at the sky too much. They lose touch with their feet. They aren't a patch on a woman except they're better at fixing cars and playing football, just what we need for the improvement of the human race, right?

That was the way she talked, even in front of Luke. He didn't mind, he teased her by pretending to be macho, he'd tell her women were incapable of abstract thought and she'd have another drink and grin at him.

Chauvinist pig, she'd say.

Isn't she quaint, Luke would say to me, and my mother would look sly, furtive almost.

I'm entitled, she'd say. I'm old enough, I've paid my dues, it's time for me to be quaint. You're still wet behind the ears. Piglet, I should have said.

As for you, she'd say to me, you're just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve me.

But she wouldn't say things like that until after the third drink. You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him, slicing up the carrots. Don't you know how many women's lives, how many women's *bodies*, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?

Cooking's my hobby, Luke would say. I enjoy it.

Hobby, schmobby, my mother would say. You don't have to make excuses to me. Once upon a time you wouldn't have been allowed to have such a hobby, they'd have called you queer.

Now, Mother, I would say. Let's not get into an argument about nothing.

Nothing, she'd say bitterly. You call it nothing. You don't un-

derstand, do you. You don't understand at all what I'm talking about.

Sometimes she would cry. I was so lonely, she'd say. You have no idea how lonely I was. And I had friends, I was a lucky one, but I was lonely anyway.

I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once.

I want her back. I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting.

It's hot in here, and too noisy. The women's voices rise around me, a soft chant that is still too loud for me, after the days and days of silence. In the corner of the room there's a bloodstained sheet, bundled and tossed there, from when the waters broke. I hadn't noticed it before.

The room smells too, the air is close, they should open a window. The smell is of our own flesh, an organic smell, sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet, and another smell, more animal, that's coming, it must be, from Janine: a smell of dens, of inhabited caves, the smell of the plaid blanket on the bed when the cat gave birth on it, once, before she was spayed. Smell of matrix.

"Breathe, breathe," we chant, as we have been taught. "Hold, hold. Expel, expel, expel." We chant to the count of five. Five in, hold for five, out for five. Janine, her eyes closed, tries to slow her breathing. Aunt Elizabeth feels for the contractions.

Now Janine is restless, she wants to walk. The two women help her off the bed, support her on either side while she paces. A contraction hits her, she doubles over. One of the women kneels and rubs her back. We are all good at this, we've had lessons. I recognize Ofglen, my shopping partner, sitting two away from me. The soft chanting envelops us like a membrane.

A Martha arrives, with a tray: a jug of fruit juice, the kind you

make from powder, grape it looks like, and a stack of paper cups. She sets it on the rug in front of the chanting women. Ofglen, not missing a beat, pours, and the paper cups pass down the line.

I receive a cup, lean to the side to pass it, and the woman next to me says, low in my ear, "Are you looking for anyone?"

"Moirra," I say, just as low. "Dark hair, freckles."

"No," the woman says. I don't know this woman, she wasn't at the Center with me, though I've seen her, shopping. "But I'll watch for you."

"Are you?" I say.

"Alma," she says. "What's your real name?"

I want to tell her there was an Alma with me at the Center. I want to tell her my name, but Aunt Elizabeth raises her head, staring around the room, she must have heard a break in the chant, so there's no more time. Sometimes you can find things out, on Birth Days. But there would be no point in asking about Luke. He wouldn't be where any of these women would be likely to see him.

The chanting goes on, it begins to catch me. It's hard work, you're supposed to concentrate. Identify with your body, said Aunt Elizabeth. Already I can feel slight pains, in my belly, and my breasts are heavy. Janine screams, a weak scream, partway between a scream and a groan.

"She's going into transition," says Aunt Elizabeth.

One of the helpers wipes Janine's forehead with a damp cloth. Janine is sweating now, her hair is escaping in wisps from the elastic band, bits of it stick to her forehead and neck. Her flesh is damp, saturated, lustrous.

"Pant! pant! pant!" we chant.

"I want to go outside," says Janine. "I want to go for a walk. I feel fine. I have to go to the can."

We all know that she's in transition, she doesn't know what she's doing. Which of these statements is true? Probably the last one. Aunt Elizabeth signals, two women stand beside the portable toilet, Janine is lowered gently onto it. There's another smell, added to the others in the room. Janine groans again, her head bent over so all we can see is her hair. Crouching like that, she's like a doll, an old one that's been pillaged and discarded, in some corner, akimbo.

Janine is up again and walking. "I want to sit down," she says. How long have we been here? Minutes or hours. I'm sweating now, my dress under my arms is drenched, I taste salt on my upper lip, the false pains clench at me, the others feel it too, I can tell by the way they sway. Janine is sucking on an ice cube. Then, after that, inches away or miles, "No," she screams. "Oh no, oh no oh no." It's her second baby, she had another child, once, I know that from the Center, when she used to cry about it at night, like the rest of us only more noisily. So she ought to be able to remember this, what it's like, what's coming. But who can remember pain, once it's over? All that remains of it is a shadow, not in the mind even, in the flesh. Pain marks you, but too deep to see. Out of sight, out of mind.

Someone has spiked the grape juice. Someone has pinched a bottle, from downstairs. It won't be the first time at such a gathering; but they'll turn a blind eye. We too need our orgies.

"Dim the lights," says Aunt Elizabeth. "Tell her it's time."

Someone stands, moves to the wall, the light in the room fades to twilight, our voices dwindle to a chorus of creaks, of husky whis-pers, like grasshoppers in a field at night. Two leave the room, two others lead Janine to the Birthing Stool, where she sits on the lower of the two seats. She's calmer now, air sucks evenly into her lungs, we lean forward, tensed, the muscles in our backs and bellies hurt from the strain. It's coming, it's coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other's hands, we are no longer single.

The Commander's Wife hurries in, in her ridiculous white cotton nightgown, her spindly legs sticking out beneath it. Two of the Wives in their blue dresses and veils hold her by the arms, as if she needs it; she has a tight little smile on her face, like a hostess at a party she'd rather not be giving. She must know what we think of her. She scrambles onto the Birthing Stool, sits on the seat behind and above Janine, so that Janine is framed by her: her skinny legs come down on either side, like the arms of an eccentric chair. Oddly enough, she's wearing white cotton socks, and bedroom slippers, blue ones made of fuzzy material, like toilet-seat covers. But we pay no attention to the Wife, we hardly even see her, our eyes are

on Janine. In the dim light, in her white gown, she glows like a moon in cloud.

She's grunting now, with the effort. "Push, push, push," we whisper. "Relax. Pant. Push, push, push." We're with her, we're the same as her, we're drunk. Aunt Elizabeth kneels, with an outspread towel to catch the baby, here's the crowning, the glory, the head, purple and smeared with yoghurt, another push and it slithers out, slick with fluid and blood, into our waiting. Oh praise.

We hold our breath as Aunt Elizabeth inspects it: a girl, poor thing, but so far so good, at least there's nothing wrong with it, that can be seen, hands, feet, eyes, we silently count, everything is in place. Aunt Elizabeth, holding the baby, looks up at us and smiles. We smile too, we are one smile, tears run down our cheeks, we are so happy.

Our happiness is part memory. What I remember is Luke, with me in the hospital, standing beside my head, holding my hand, in the green gown and white mask they gave him. Oh, he said, oh Jesus, breath coming out in wonder. That night he couldn't go to sleep at all, he said, he was so high.

Aunt Elizabeth is gently washing the baby off, it isn't crying much, it stops. As quietly as possible, so as not to startle it, we rise, crowd around Janine, squeezing her, patting her. She's crying too. The two Wives in blue help the third Wife, the Wife of the household, down from the Birthing Stool and over to the bed, where they lay her down and tuck her in. The baby, washed now and quiet, is placed ceremoniously in her arms. The Wives from downstairs are crowding in now, pushing among us, pushing us aside. They talk too loud, some of them are still carrying their plates, their coffee cups, their wine glasses, some of them are still chewing, they cluster around the bed, the mother and child, cooing and congratulating. Envy radiates from them, I can smell it, faint wisps of acid, mingled with their perfume. The Commander's Wife looks down at the baby as if it's a bouquet of flowers: something she's won, a tribute.

The Wives are here to bear witness to the naming. It's the Wives who do the naming, around here.

"Angela," says the Commander's Wife.

"Angela, Angela," the Wives repeat, twittering. "What a sweet name! Oh, she's perfect! Oh, she's wonderful!"

We stand between Janine and the bed, so she won't have to see this. Someone gives her a drink of grape juice, I hope there's wine in it, she's still having the pains, for the afterbirth, she's crying helplessly, burnt-out miserable tears. Nevertheless we are jubilant, it's a victory, for all of us. We've done it.

She'll be allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months, they believe in mother's milk. After that she'll be transferred, to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward.

The Birthmobile is waiting outside, to deliver us back to our own households. The doctors are still in their van; their faces appear at the window, white blobs, like the faces of sick children confined to the house. One of them opens the door and comes towards us.

"Was it all right?" he asks, anxious.

"Yes," I say. By now I'm wrung out, exhausted. My breasts are painful, they're leaking a little. Fake milk, it happens this way with some of us. We sit on our benches, facing one another, as we are transported; we're without emotion now, almost without feeling, we might be bundles of red cloth. We ache. Each of us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. What confronts us, now the excitement's over, is our own failure. Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.

your eyes: purple animals, in the bushes beside the road, the vague outlines of men, which would disappear when you looked at them straight.

I'm too tired to go on with this story. I'm too tired to think about where I am. Here is a different story, a better one. This is the story of what happened to Moira.

Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia. There can be alliances even in such places, even under such circumstances. This is something you can depend upon: there will always be alliances, of one kind or another.

Aunt Lydia called Janine into her office.

Blessed be the fruit, Janine, Aunt Lydia would have said, without looking up from her desk, where she was writing something. For every rule there is always an exception: this too can be depended upon. The Aunts are allowed to read and write.

May the Lord open, Janine would have replied, tonelessly, in her transparent voice, her voice of raw egg white.

I feel I can rely on you, Janine, Aunt Lydia would have said, raising her eyes from the page at last and fixing Janine with that look of hers, through the spectacles, a look that managed to be both menacing and beseeching, all at once. Help me, that look said, we are all in this together. You are a reliable girl, she went on, not like some of the others.

She thought all Janine's sniveling and repentance meant something, she thought Janine had been broken, she thought Janine was a true believer. But by that time Janine was like a puppy that's been kicked too often, by too many people, at random: she'd roll over for anyone, she'd tell anything, just for a moment of approbation.

So Janine would have said: I hope so, Aunt Lydia. I hope I have become worthy of your trust. Or some such thing.

Janine, said Aunt Lydia, something terrible has happened.

Janine looked down at the floor. Whatever it was, she knew she would not be blamed for it, she was blameless. But what use had that been to her in the past, to be blameless? So at the same time she felt guilty, and as if she was about to be punished.

Do you know about it, Janine? said Aunt Lydia softly.

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By the time the Birthmobile arrives in front of the house, it's late afternoon. The sun is coming weakly through the clouds, the smell of wet grass warming up is in the air. I've been at the Birth all day; you lose track of time. Cora will have done the shopping today, I'm excused from all duties. I go up the stairs, lifting my feet heavily from one step to the next, holding on to the banister. I feel as if I've been awake for days and running hard; my chest hurts, my muscles cramp as if they're out of sugar. For once I welcome solitude.

I lie on the bed. I would like to rest, go to sleep, but I'm too tired, at the same time too excited, my eyes won't close. I look up at the ceiling, tracing the foliage of the wreath. Today it makes me think of a hat, the large-brimmed hats women used to wear at some period during the old days: hats like enormous halos, festooned with fruit and flowers, and the feathers of exotic birds; hats like an idea of paradise, floating just above the head, a thought solidified.

In a minute the wreath will start to color and I will begin seeing things. That's how tired I am: as when you'd driven all night, into the dawn, for some reason, I won't think about that now, keeping each other awake with stories and taking turns at the wheel, and as the sun would begin to come up you'd see things at the sides of

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No, Aunt Lydia, said Janine. She knew that at this moment it was necessary to look up, to look Aunt Lydia straight in the eyes. After a moment she managed it.

Because if you do I will be very disappointed in you, said Aunt Lydia.

As the Lord is my witness, said Janine with a show of fervor.

Aunt Lydia allowed herself one of her pauses. She fiddled with her pen. Moira is no longer with us, she said at last.

Oh, said Janine. She was neutral about this. Moira wasn't a friend of hers. Is she dead? she asked after a moment.

Then Aunt Lydia told her the story. Moira had raised her hand to go to the washroom, during Exercises. She had gone. Aunt Elizabeth was on washroom duty. Aunt Elizabeth stayed outside the washroom door, as usual; Moira went in. After a moment Moira called to Aunt Elizabeth: the toilet was overflowing, could Aunt Elizabeth come and fix it? It was true that the toilets sometimes overflowed. Unknown persons stuffed wads of toilet paper down them to make them do this very thing. The Aunts had been working on some foolproof way of preventing this, but funds were short and right now they had to make do with what was at hand, and they hadn't figured out a way of locking up the toilet paper. Possibly they should keep it outside the door on a table and hand each person a sheet or several sheets as she went in. But that was for the future. It takes a while to get the wrinkles out, of anything new.

Aunt Elizabeth, suspecting no harm, went into the washroom. Aunt Lydia had to admit it was a little foolish of her. On the other hand, she'd gone in to fix a toilet on several previous occasions without mishap.

Moira was not lying, water was running over the floor, and several pieces of disintegrating fecal matter. It was not pleasant and Aunt Elizabeth was annoyed. Moira stood politely aside, and Aunt Elizabeth hurried into the cubicle Moira had indicated and bent over the back of the toilet. She intended to lift off the porcelain lid and fiddle with the arrangement of bulb and plug inside. She had both hands on the lid when she felt something hard and sharp and possibly metallic jab into her ribs from behind. Don't move, said Moira, or I'll stick it all the way in, I know where, I'll puncture your lung.

They found out afterwards that she'd dismantled the inside of

one of the toilets and taken out the long thin pointed lever, the part that attaches to the handle at one end and the chain at the other. It isn't too hard to do if you know how, and Moira had mechanical ability, she used to fix her own car, the minor things. Soon after this the toilets were fitted with chains to hold the tops on, and when they overflowed it took a long time to get them open. We had several floods that way.

Aunt Elizabeth couldn't see what was poking into her back, Aunt Lydia said. She was a brave woman . . .

Oh yes, said Janine.

. . . but not foolhardy, said Aunt Lydia, frowning a little. Janine had been overenthusiastic, which sometimes has the force of a denial. She did as Moira said, Aunt Lydia continued. Moira got hold of her cattle prod and her whistle, ordering Aunt Elizabeth to unclip them from her belt. Then she hurried Aunt Elizabeth down the stairs to the basement. They were on the second floor, not the third, so there were only two flights of stairs to be negotiated. Classes were in session so there was nobody in the halls. They did see another Aunt, but she was at the far end of the corridor and not looking their way. Aunt Elizabeth could have screamed at this point but she knew Moira meant what she said; Moira had a bad reputation.

Oh yes, said Janine.

Moira took Aunt Elizabeth along the corridor of empty lockers, past the door to the gymnasium, and into the furnace room. She told Aunt Elizabeth to take off all her clothes . . .

Oh, said Janine weakly, as if to protest this sacrilege.

. . . and Moira took off her own clothes and put on those of Aunt Elizabeth, which did not fit her exactly but well enough. She was not overly cruel to Aunt Elizabeth, she allowed her to put on her own red dress. The veil she tore into strips, and tied Aunt Elizabeth up with them, behind the furnace. She stuffed some of the cloth into her mouth and tied it in place with another strip. She tied a strip around Aunt Elizabeth's neck and tied the other end to her feet, behind. She is a cunning and dangerous woman, said Aunt Lydia.

Janine said, May I sit down? As if it had all been too much for her. She had something to trade at last, for a token at least.

Yes, Janine, said Aunt Lydia, surprised, but knowing she could

not refuse at this point. She was asking for Janine's attention, her cooperation. She indicated the chair in the corner. Janine drew it forward.

I could kill you, you know, said Moira, when Aunt Elizabeth was safely stowed out of sight behind the furnace. I could injure you badly so you would never feel good in your body again. I could zap you with this, or stick this thing into your eye. Just remember I didn't, if it ever comes to that.

Aunt Lydia didn't repeat any of this part to Janine, but I expect Moira said something like it. In any case she didn't kill or mutilate Aunt Elizabeth, who a few days later, after she'd recovered from her seven hours behind the furnace and presumably from the interrogation — for the possibility of collusion would not have been ruled out, by the Aunts or by anyone else — was back in operation at the Center.

Moira stood up straight and looked firmly ahead. She drew her shoulders back, pulled up her spine, and compressed her lips. This was not our usual posture. Usually we walked with heads bent down, our eyes on our hands or the ground. Moira didn't look much like Aunt Elizabeth, even with the brown wimple in place, but her stiff-backed posture was apparently enough to convince the Angels on guard, who never looked at any of us very closely, even and perhaps especially the Aunts; because Moira marched straight out the front door, with the bearing of a person who knew where she was going; was saluted, presented Aunt Elizabeth's pass, which they didn't bother to check, because who would affront an Aunt in that way. And disappeared.

Oh, said Janine. Who can tell what she felt? Maybe she wanted to cheer. If so, she kept it well hidden.

So, Janine, said Aunt Lydia. Here is what I want you to do.

Janine opened her eyes wide and tried to look innocent and attentive.

I want you to keep your ears open. Maybe one of the others was involved.

Yes, Aunt Lydia, said Janine.

And come and tell me about it, won't you, dear? If you hear anything.

Yes, Aunt Lydia, said Janine. She knew she would not have to

kneel down anymore, at the front of the classroom, and listen to all of us shouting at her that it was her fault. Now it would be someone else for a while. She was, temporarily, off the hook.

The fact that she told Dolores all about this encounter in Aunt Lydia's office meant nothing. It didn't mean she wouldn't testify against us, any of us, if she had the occasion. We knew that. By this time we were treating her the way people used to treat those with no legs who sold pencils on street corners. We avoided her when we could, were charitable to her when it couldn't be helped. She was a danger to us, we knew that.

Dolores probably patted her on the back and said she was a good sport to tell us. Where did this exchange take place? In the gymnasium, when we were getting ready for bed. Dolores had the bed next to Janine's.

The story passed among us that night, in the semidarkness, under our breath, from bed to bed.

Moira was out there somewhere. She was at large, or dead. What would she do? The thought of what she would do expanded till it filled the room. At any moment there might be a shattering explosion, the glass of the windows would fall inward, the doors would swing open. . . . Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman.

I think we found this frightening.

Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure. In the upper reaches of the atmosphere you'd come apart, you'd vaporize, there would be no pressure holding you together.

Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked.

We expected her to be dragged in at any minute, as she had been before. We could not imagine what they might do to her this time. It would be very bad, whatever it was.

But nothing happened. Moira didn't reappear. She hasn't yet.

giveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest.

Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing.

I want you to kiss me, said the Commander.

Well, of course something came before that. Such requests never come flying out of the blue.

I went to sleep after all, and dreamed I was wearing earrings, and one of them was broken; nothing beyond that, just the brain going through its back files, and I was wakened by Cora with the dinner tray, and time was back on track.

"It a good baby?" says Cora as she's setting down the tray. She must know already, they have a kind of word-of-mouth telegraph, from household to household, news gets around; but it gives her pleasure to hear about it, as if my words will make it more real.

"It's fine," I say. "A keeper. A girl."

Cora smiles at me, a smile that includes. These are the moments that must make what she is doing seem worthwhile to her.

"That's good," she says. Her voice is almost wistful, and I think of course. She would have liked to have been there. It's like a party she couldn't go to.

"Maybe we have one, soon," she says, shyly. By *we* she means me. It's up to me to repay the team, justify my food and keep, like a queen ant with eggs. Rita may disapprove of me, but Cora does not. Instead she depends on me. She hopes, and I am the vehicle of her hope.

Her hope is of the simplest kind. She wants a Birth Day, here, with guests and food and presents, she wants a little child to spoil in the kitchen, to iron clothes for, to slip cookies into when no one's watching. I am to provide these joys for her. I would rather have the disapproval, I feel more worthy of it.

The dinner is beef stew. I have some trouble finishing it, because

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. If I ever get out of here —

Let's stop there. I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right, they did get out one way or another, and it didn't last forever. Although for them it may have lasted all the forever they had.

When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many. But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far, please remember: you will never be subjected to the temptation or feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that for-

halfway through it I remember what the day has erased right out of my head. It's true what they say, it's a trance state, giving birth or being there, you lose track of the rest of your life, you focus only on that one instant. But now it comes back to me, and I know I'm not prepared.

The clock in the hall downstairs strikes nine. I press my hands against the sides of my thighs, breathe in, set out along the hall and softly down the stairs. Serena Joy may still be at the house where the Birth took place; that's lucky, he couldn't have foreseen it. On these days the Wives hang around for hours, helping to open the presents, gossiping, getting drunk. Something has to be done to dispel their envy. I follow the downstairs corridor back, past the door that leads into the kitchen, along to the next door, his. I stand outside it, feeling like a child who's been summoned, at school, to the principal's office. What have I done wrong?

My presence here is illegal. It's forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favors are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no thresholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.

So why does he want to see me, at night, alone?
If I'm caught, it's to Serena's tender mercies I'll be delivered. He isn't supposed to meddle in such household discipline, that's women's business. After that, reclassification. I could become an Unwoman.

But to refuse to see him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power.

But there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It's this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It's like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear. I want to know what he wants.

I raise my hand, knock, on the door of this forbidden room where I have never been, where women do not go. Not even Serena Joy comes here, and the cleaning is done by Guardians.

* * *

What secrets, what male totems are kept in here?
I'm told to enter. I open the door, step in.

What is on the other side is normal life. I should say: what is on the other side looks like normal life. There is a desk, of course, with a Computalk on it, and a black leather chair behind it. There's a potted plant on the desk, a pen-holder set, papers. There's an oriental rug on the floor, and a fireplace without a fire in it. There's a small sofa, covered in brown plush, a television set, an end table, a couple of chairs.

But all around the walls there are bookcases. They're filled with books. Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare.

The Commander is standing in front of the fireless fireplace, back to it, one elbow on the carved wooden overmantel, other hand in his pocket. It's such a studied pose, something of the country squire, some old come-on from a glossy men's mag. He probably decided ahead of time that he'd be standing like that when I came in. When I knocked he probably rushed over to the fireplace and propped himself up. He should have a black patch, over one eye, a cravat with horseshoes on it.

It's all very well for me to think these things, quick as staccato, a jittering of the brain. An inner jeering. But it's panic. The fact is I'm terrified.

I don't say anything.

"Close the door behind you," he says, pleasantly enough. I do it, and turn back.

"Hello," he says.

It's the old form of greeting. I haven't heard it for a long time, for years. Under the circumstances it seems out of place, comical even, a flip backward in time, a stunt. I can think of nothing appropriate to say in return.

I think I will cry.

He must have noticed this, because he looks at me, puzzled, gives a little frown I choose to interpret as concern, though it may merely be irritation. "Here," he says. "You can sit down." He pulls a chair out for me, sets it in front of his desk. Then he goes around behind

the desk and sits down, slowly and it seems to me elaborately. What this act tells me is that he hasn't brought me here to touch me in any way, against my will. He smiles. The smile is not sinister or predatory. It's merely a smile, a formal kind of smile, friendly but a little distant, as if I'm a kitten in a window. One he's looking at but doesn't intend to buy.

I sit up straight on the chair, my hands folded on my lap. I feel as if my feet in their flat red shoes aren't quite touching the floor. But of course they are.

"You must find this strange," he says.

I simply look at him. The understatement of the year, was a phrase my mother uses. Used.

I feel like cotton candy: sugar and air. Squeeze me and I'd turn into a small sickly damp wad of weeping pinky-red.

"I guess it is a little strange," he says, as if I've answered.

I think I should have a hat on, tied with a bow under my chin. "I want . . ." he says.

I try not to lean forward. Yes? Yes yes? What, then? What does he want? But I won't give it away, this eagerness of mine. It's a bargaining session, things are about to be exchanged. She who does not hesitate is lost. I'm not giving anything away: selling only.

"I would like —" he says. "This will sound silly." And he does look embarrassed, *sheepish* was the word, the way men used to look once. He's old enough to remember how to look that way, and to remember also how appealing women once found it. The young ones don't know those tricks. They've never had to use them.

"I'd like you to play a game of Scrabble with me," he says. I hold myself absolutely rigid. I keep my face unmoving. So that's what's in the forbidden room! Scrabble! I want to laugh, shriek with laughter, fall off my chair. This was once the game of old women, old men, in the summers or in retirement villas, to be played when there was nothing good on television. Or of adolescents, once, long long ago. My mother had a set, kept at the back of the hall cupboard, with the Christmas tree decorations in their cardboard boxes. Once she tried to interest me in it, when I was thirteen and miserable and at loose ends.

Now of course it's something different. Now it's forbidden, for us. Now it's dangerous. Now it's indecent. Now it's something he

can't do with his Wife. Now it's desirable. Now he's compromised himself. It's as if he's offered me drugs.

"All right," I say, as if indifferent. I can in fact hardly speak.

He doesn't say why he wants to play Scrabble with me. I don't ask him. He merely takes a box out from one of the drawers in his desk and opens it up. There are the plasticized wooden counters I remember, the board divided into squares, the little holders for setting the letters in. He dumps the counters out on the top of his desk and begins to turn them over. After a moment I join in.

"You know how to play?" he says.

I nod.

We play two games. *Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter *C*. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious.

I win the first game, I let him win the second: I still haven't discovered what the terms are, what I will be able to ask for, in exchange.

Finally he tells me it's time for me to go home. Those are the words he uses: *go home*. He means to my room. He asks me if I will be all right, as if the stairway is a dark street. I say yes. We open his study door, just a crack, and listen for noises in the hall.

This is like being on a date. This is like sneaking into the dorm after hours.

This is conspiracy.

"Thank you," he says. "For the game." Then he says, "I want you to kiss me."

I think about how I could take the back of the toilet apart, the toilet in my own bathroom, on a bath night, quickly and quietly, so Cora outside on the chair would not hear me. I could get the sharp lever out and hide it in my sleeve, and smuggle it into the Commander's study, the next time, because after a request like that there's always a next time, whether you say yes or no. I think about how I could approach the Commander, to kiss him, here alone, and take off his jacket, as if to allow or invite something further, some

approach to true love, and put my arms around him and slip the lever out from the sleeve and drive the sharp end into him suddenly, between his ribs. I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands.

In fact I don't think about anything of the kind. I put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that, at the time, but I didn't. As I said, this is a reconstruction.

"All right," I say. I go to him and place my lips, closed, against his. I smell the shaving lotion, the usual kind, the hint of mothballs, familiar enough to me. But he's like someone I've only just met.

He draws away, looks down at me. There's the smile again, the sheepish one. Such candor. "Not like that," he says. "As if you meant it."

He was so sad.

That is a reconstruction, too.