

MARGARET
ATWOOD

Winner

**The
Booker
Prize
2019**

**THE
NUMBER ONE
BESTSELLER**

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GUARDIAN

'POWERFUL'

THE TIMES

**THE
TESTAMENTS**

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SUNDAY TIMES

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‘A rallying cry for activism... Atwood’s task in returning to the world of her best-known work was a big one, but the result is a success’

GUARDIAN

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SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

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DAILY MIRROR

'Undeniably page-turning stuff'

THE TIMES

'The Testaments lived up to the hype'

DAILY EXPRESS

'Iconic...infused with rays of hope'

STYLIST

MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than fifty books of fiction, poetry and critical essays. Her novels include *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy. Her 1985 classic, *The Handmaid's Tale*, went back into the bestseller charts with the election of Donald Trump, when the Handmaids became a symbol of resistance against the disempowerment of women, and with the 2017 release of the award-winning Channel 4 TV series. Its sequel, *The Testaments*, was published in 2019 and was a global number one bestseller and won the Booker Prize.

Atwood has won numerous awards including the Booker Prize, the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society, the Franz Kafka Prize, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade and the PEN USA Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2019 she was made a member of the Order of the Companions of Honour for services to literature. She has also worked as a cartoonist, illustrator, librettist, playwright and puppeteer.

She lives in Toronto, Canada.

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Dorinda*
Wandering Wenda

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Angel Catbird
The Handmaid's Tale

THE TESTAMENTS

MARGARET ATWOOD

VINTAGE

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“Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster.”

—GEORGE ELIOT, *DANIEL DERONDA*

“When we look one another in the face, we’re neither of us just looking at a face we hate—no, we’re gazing into a mirror. . . . Do you really not recognize yourselves in us . . . ?”

—OBERSTURMBANNFÜHRER LISS TO OLD BOLSHIEV
MOSTOVSKOY, VASILY GROSSMAN, *LIFE AND FATE*

“Freedom is a heavy load, a great and strange burden for the spirit to undertake. . . . It is not a gift given, but a choice made, and the choice may be a hard one.”

—URSULA K. LE GUIN, *THE TOMBS OF ATUAN*

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I

Statue



The Ardua Hall Holograph

1

Only dead people are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified.

This statue was a small token of appreciation for my many contributions, said the citation, which was read out by Aunt Vidala. She'd been assigned the task by our superiors, and was far from appreciative. I thanked her with as much modesty as I could summon, then pulled the rope that released the cloth drape shrouding me; it billowed to the ground, and there I stood. We don't do cheering here at Ardua Hall, but there was some discreet clapping. I inclined my head in a nod.

My statue is larger than life, as statues tend to be, and shows me as younger, slimmer, and in better shape than I've been for some time. I am standing straight, shoulders back, my lips curved into a firm but benevolent smile. My eyes are fixed on some cosmic point of reference understood to represent my idealism, my unflinching commitment to duty, my determination to move forward despite all obstacles. Not that anything in the sky would be visible to my statue, placed as it is in a morose cluster of trees and shrubs beside the footpath running in front of Ardua Hall. We Aunts must not be too presumptuous, even in stone.

Clutching my left hand is a girl of seven or eight, gazing up at me with trusting eyes. My right hand rests on the head of a woman crouched at my side, her hair veiled, her eyes upturned in an

expression that could be read as either craven or grateful—one of our Handmaids—and behind me is one of my Pearl Girls, ready to set out on her missionary work. Hanging from a belt around my waist is my Taser. This weapon reminds me of my failings: had I been more effective, I would not have needed such an implement. The persuasion in my voice would have been enough.

As a group of statuary it's not a great success: too crowded. I would have preferred more emphasis on myself. But at least I look sane. It could well have been otherwise, as the elderly sculptress—a true believer since deceased—had a tendency to confer bulging eyes on her subjects as a sign of their pious fervour. Her bust of Aunt Helena looks rabid, that of Aunt Vidala is hyperthyroid, and that of Aunt Elizabeth appears ready to explode.

At the unveiling the sculptress was nervous. Was her rendition of me sufficiently flattering? Did I approve of it? Would I be *seen* to approve? I toyed with the idea of frowning as the sheet came off, but thought better of it: I am not without compassion. “Very lifelike,” I said.

That was nine years ago. Since then my statue has weathered: pigeons have decorated me, moss has sprouted in my damper crevices. Votaries have taken to leaving offerings at my feet: eggs for fertility, oranges to suggest the fullness of pregnancy, croissants to reference the moon. I ignore the breadstuffs—usually they have been rained on—but pocket the oranges. Oranges are so refreshing.

I write these words in my private sanctum within the library of Ardua Hall—one of the few libraries remaining after the enthusiastic book-burnings that have been going on across our land. The corrupt and blood-smeared fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive. Such is the theory.

But among these bloody fingerprints are those made by ourselves, and these can't be wiped away so easily. Over the years I've buried a lot of bones; now I'm inclined to dig them up again—if only for your

edification, my unknown reader. If you are reading, this manuscript at least will have survived. Though perhaps I'm fantasizing; perhaps I will never have a reader. Perhaps I'll only be talking to the wall, in more ways than one.

That's enough inscribing for today. My hand hurts, my back aches, and my nightly cup of hot milk awaits me. I'll stash this screed in its hiding place, avoiding the surveillance cameras—I know where they are, having placed them myself. Despite such precautions, I'm aware of the risk I'm running: writing can be dangerous. What betrayals, and then what denunciations, might lie in store for me? There are several within Ardua Hall who would love to get their hands on these pages.

Wait, I counsel them silently: it will get worse.

II

PRECIOUS FLOWER



Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A

2

You have asked me to tell you what it was like for me when I was growing up within Gilead. You say it will be helpful, and I do wish to be helpful. I imagine you expect nothing but horrors, but the reality is that many children were loved and cherished, in Gilead as elsewhere, and many adults were kind though fallible, in Gilead as elsewhere.

I hope you will remember, too, that we all have some nostalgia for whatever kindness we have known as children, however bizarre the conditions of that childhood may seem to others. I agree with you that Gilead ought to fade away—there is too much of wrong in it, too much that is false, and too much that is surely contrary to what God intended—but you must permit me some space to mourn the good that will be lost.

At our school, pink was for spring and summer, plum was for fall and winter, white was for special days: Sundays and celebrations. Arms covered, hair covered, skirts down to the knee before you were five and no more than two inches above the ankle after that, because the urges of men were terrible things and those urges needed to be curbed. The man eyes that were always roaming here and there like the eyes of tigers, those searchlight eyes, needed to be shielded from the alluring and indeed blinding power of us—of our shapely

or skinny or fat legs, of our graceful or knobbly or sausage arms, of our peachy or blotchy skins, of our entwining curls of shining hair or our coarse unruly pelts or our straw-like wispy braids, it did not matter. Whatever our shapes and features, we were snares and enticements despite ourselves, we were the innocent and blameless causes that through our very nature could make men drunk with lust, so that they'd stagger and lurch and topple over the verge—The verge of what? we wondered. Was it like a cliff?—and go plunging down in flames, like snowballs made of burning sulphur hurled by the angry hand of God. We were custodians of an invaluable treasure that existed, unseen, inside us; we were precious flowers that had to be kept safely inside glass houses, or else we would be ambushed and our petals would be torn off and our treasure would be stolen and we would be ripped apart and trampled by the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner, out there in the wide sharp-edged sin-ridden world.

That was the kind of thing runny-nosed Aunt Vidala would tell us at school while we were doing petit-point embroidery for handkerchiefs and footstools and framed pictures: flowers in a vase, fruit in a bowl were the favoured patterns. But Aunt Estée, the teacher we liked the best, would say Aunt Vidala was overdoing it and there was no point in frightening us out of our wits, since to instill such an aversion might have a negative influence on the happiness of our future married lives.

"All men are not like that, girls," she would say soothingly. "The better kind have superior characters. Some of them have decent self-restraint. And once you are married it will seem quite different to you, and not very fearsome at all." Not that she would know anything about it, since the Aunts were not married; they were not allowed to be. That was why they could have writing and books.

"We and your fathers and mothers will choose your husbands wisely for you when the time comes," Aunt Estée would say. "So you don't need to be afraid. Just learn your lessons and trust your elders to do what is best, and everything will unfold as it should. I will pray for it."

But despite Aunt Estée's dimples and friendly smile, it was Aunt Vidala's version that prevailed. It turned up in my nightmares: the shattering of the glass house, then the rending and tearing and the trampling of hooves, with pink and white and plum fragments of myself scattered over the ground. I dreaded the thought of growing older—older enough for a wedding. I had no faith in the wise choices of the Aunts: I feared that I would end up married to a goat on fire.

The pink, the white, and the plum dresses were the rule for special girls like us. Ordinary girls from Econofamilies wore the same thing all the time—those ugly multicoloured stripes and grey cloaks, like the clothes of their mothers. They did not even learn *petit-point* embroidery or crochet work, just plain sewing and the making of paper flowers and other such chores. They were not pre-chosen to be married to the very best men—to the Sons of Jacob and the other Commanders or their sons—not like us; although they might get to be chosen once they were older if they were pretty enough.

Nobody said that. You were not supposed to preen yourself on your good looks, it was not modest, or take any notice of the good looks of other people. Though we girls knew the truth: that it was better to be pretty than ugly. Even the Aunts paid more attention to the pretty ones. But if you were already pre-chosen, pretty didn't matter so much.

I didn't have a squint like Huldah or a pinchy built-in frown like Shunammite, and I didn't have barely-there eyebrows like Becka, but I was unfinished. I had a dough face, like the cookies my favourite Martha, Zilla, made for me as a treat, with raisin eyes and pumpkin-seed teeth. But though I was not especially pretty, I was very, very chosen. Doubly chosen: not only pre-chosen to marry a Commander but chosen in the first place by Tabitha, who was my mother.

That is what Tabitha used to tell me: "I went for a walk in the forest," she would say, "and then I came to an enchanted castle, and there were a lot of little girls locked inside, and none of them had any mothers, and they were under the spell of the wicked witches.

I had a magic ring that unlocked the castle, but I could only rescue one little girl. So I looked at them all very carefully, and then, out of the whole crowd, I chose you!”

“What happened to the others?” I would ask. “The other little girls?”

“Different mothers rescued them,” she would say.

“Did they have magic rings too?”

“Of course, my darling. In order to be a mother, you need to have a magic ring.”

“Where’s the magic ring?” I would ask. “Where is it now?”

“It’s right here on my finger,” she would say, indicating the third finger of her left hand. The heart finger, she said it was. “But my ring had only one wish in it, and I used that one up on you. So now it’s an ordinary, everyday mother ring.”

At this point I was allowed to try on the ring, which was gold, with three diamonds in it: a big one, and a smaller one on either side. It did look as if it might have been magic once.

“Did you lift me up and carry me?” I would ask. “Out of the forest?” I knew the story off by heart, but I liked to hear it repeated.

“No, my dearest, you were already too big for that. If I had carried you I would have coughed, and then the witches would have heard us.” I could see this was true: she did cough quite a lot. “So I took you by the hand, and we crept out of the castle so the witches wouldn’t hear us. We both said *Shh, shh*”—here she would hold her finger up to her lips, and I would hold my finger up too and say *Shh, shh* delightedly—“and then we had to run very fast through the forest, to get away from the wicked witches, because one of them had seen us going out the door. We ran, and then we hid in a hollow tree. It was very dangerous!”

I did have a hazy memory of running through a forest with someone holding my hand. Had I hidden in a hollow tree? It seemed to me that I had hidden somewhere. So maybe it was true.

“And then what happened?” I would ask.

“And then I brought you to this beautiful house. Aren’t you happy here? You are so cherished, by all of us! Aren’t we both lucky that I chose you?”

I would be nestled close to her, with her arm around me and my head against her thin body, through which I could feel her bumpy ribs. My ear would be pressed to her chest, and I could hear her heart hammering away inside her—faster and faster, it seemed to me, as she waited for me to say something. I knew my answer had power: I could make her smile, or not.

What could I say but yes and yes? Yes, I was happy. Yes, I was lucky. Anyway it was true.

How old was I at that time? Perhaps six or seven. It's hard for me to know, as I have no clear memories before that time.

I loved Tabitha very much. She was beautiful although so thin, and she would spend hours playing with me. We had a dollhouse that was like our own house, with a living room and a dining room and a big kitchen for the Marthas, and a father's study with a desk and bookshelves. All the little pretend books on the shelves were blank. I asked why there was nothing inside them—I had a dim feeling that there were supposed to be marks on those pages—and my mother said that books were decorations, like vases of flowers.

What a lot of lies she had to tell for my sake! To keep me safe! But she was up to it. She had a very inventive mind.

We had lovely big bedrooms on the second floor of the dollhouse, with curtains and wallpaper and pictures—nice pictures, fruit and flowers—and smaller bedrooms on the third floor, and five bathrooms in all, though one was a powder room—Why was it called that? What was “powder”?—and a cellar with supplies.

We had all the dolls for the dollhouse that you might need: a mother doll in the blue dress of the Commanders' Wives, a little girl doll with three dresses—pink, white, and plum, just like mine—three Martha dolls in dull green with aprons, a Guardian of the Faith with a cap to drive the car and mow the lawn, two Angels to stand at the gate with their miniature plastic guns so nobody could get in

and hurt us, and a father doll in his crisp Commander's uniform. He never said much, but he paced around a lot and sat at the end of the dining table, and the Marthas brought him things on trays, and then he would go into his study and close the door.

In this, the Commander doll was like my own father, Commander Kyle, who would smile at me and ask if I had been good, and then vanish. The difference was that I could see what the Commander doll was doing inside his study, which was sitting at his desk with his Computalk and a stack of papers, but with my real-life father I couldn't know that: going into my father's study was forbidden.

What my father was doing in there was said to be very important—the important things that men did, too important for females to meddle with because they had smaller brains that were incapable of thinking large thoughts, according to Aunt Vidala, who taught us Religion. It would be like trying to teach a cat to crochet, said Aunt Estée, who taught us Crafts, and that would make us laugh, because how ridiculous! Cats didn't even have fingers!

So men had something in their heads that was like fingers, only a sort of fingers girls did not have. And that explained everything, said Aunt Vidala, and we will have no more questions about it. Her mouth clicked shut, locking in the other words that might have been said. I knew there must be other words, for even then the notion about the cats did not seem right. Cats did not want to crochet. And we were not cats.

Forbidden things are open to the imagination. That was why Eve ate the Apple of Knowledge, said Aunt Vidala: too much imagination. So it was better not to know some things. Otherwise your petals would get scattered.

In the dollhouse boxed set, there was a Handmaid doll with a red dress and a bulgy tummy and a white hat that hid her face, though my mother said we didn't need a Handmaid in our house because we already had me, and people shouldn't be greedy and want more than one little girl. So we wrapped the Handmaid up in tissue paper, and

Tabitha said that I could give her away later to some other little girl who didn't have such a lovely dollhouse and could make good use of the Handmaid doll.

I was happy to put the Handmaid away in the box because the real Handmaids made me nervous. We would pass them on our school outings, when we'd walk in a long double line with an Aunt at each end of it. The outings were to churches, or else to parks where we might play circle games or look at ducks in a pond. Later we would be allowed to go to Salvagings and Prayvaganzas in our white dresses and veils to see people being hanged or married, but we weren't mature enough for that yet, said Aunt Estée.

There were swings in one of the parks, but because of our skirts, which might be blown up by the wind and then looked into, we were not to think of taking such a liberty as a swing. Only boys could taste that freedom; only they could swoop and soar; only they could be airborne.

I have still never been on a swing. It remains one of my wishes.

As we marched along the street, the Handmaids would be walking two by two with their shopping baskets. They would not look at us, or not much, or not directly, and we were not supposed to look at them because it was rude to stare at them, said Aunt Estée, just as it was rude to stare at cripples or anyone else who was different. We were not allowed to ask questions about the Handmaids either.

"You'll learn about all of that when you're old enough," Aunt Vidala would say. *All of that*: the Handmaids were part of *all of that*. Something bad, then; something damaging, or something damaged, which might be the same thing. Had the Handmaids once been like us, white and pink and plum? Had they been careless, had they allowed some alluring part of themselves to show?

You couldn't see very much of them now. You couldn't even see their faces because of those white hats they wore. They all looked the same.

In our dollhouse at home there was an Aunt doll, although she didn't really belong in a house, she belonged in a school, or else at Ardua Hall, where the Aunts were said to live. When I was playing with the dollhouse by myself, I used to lock the Aunt doll in the cellar, which was not kind of me. She would pound and pound on the cellar door and scream, "Let me out," but the little girl doll and the Martha doll who'd helped her would pay no attention, and sometimes they would laugh.

I don't feel pleased with myself while recording this cruelty, even though it was only a cruelty to a doll. It's a vengeful side of my nature that I am sorry to say I have failed to subdue entirely. But in an account such as this, it is better to be scrupulous about your faults, as about all your other actions. Otherwise no one will understand why you made the decisions that you made.

It was Tabitha who taught me to be honest with myself, which is somewhat ironic in view of the lies she told me. To be fair, she probably was honest when it came to herself. She tried—I believe—to be as good a person as was possible, under the circumstances.

Each night, after telling me a story, she would tuck me into bed with my favourite stuffed animal, which was a whale—because God made whales to play in the sea, so it was all right for a whale to be something you could play with—and then we would pray.

The prayer was in the form of a song, which we would sing together:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

*Four angels standing round my bed,
Two to feet and two to head;
One to watch and one to pray,
And two to carry my soul away.*

Tabitha had a beautiful voice, like a silver flute. Every now and then, at night when I am drifting off to sleep, I can almost hear her singing.

There were a couple of things about this song that bothered me. First of all, the angels. I knew they were supposed to be the kind of angels with white nightgowns and feathers, but that was not how I pictured them. I pictured them as our kind of Angels: men in black uniforms with cloth wings sewn onto their outfits, and guns. I did not like the thought of four Angels with guns standing around my bed as I slept, because they were men after all, so what about the parts of me that might stick out from under the blankets? My feet, for instance. Wouldn't that inflame their urges? It would, there was no way around it. So the four Angels were not a restful thought.

Also, it was not encouraging to pray about dying in your sleep. I did not think I would, but what if I did? And what was my soul like—that thing the angels would carry away? Tabitha said it was the spirit part and did not die when your body did, which was supposed to be a cheerful idea.

But what did it look like, my soul? I pictured it as just like me, only much smaller: as small as the little girl doll in my dollhouse. It was inside me, so maybe it was the same thing as the invaluable treasure that Aunt Vidala said we had to guard so carefully. You could lose your soul, said Aunt Vidala, blowing her nose, in which case it would topple over the verge and hurtle down and endlessly down, and catch on fire, just like the goatish men. This was a thing I very much wished to avoid.

At the beginning of the next period I am about to describe, I must have been eight at first, or possibly nine. I can remember these events but not my exact age. It's hard to remember calendar dates, especially since we did not have calendars. But I will continue on in the best way I can.

My name at that time was Agnes Jemima. Agnes meant "lamb," said my mother, Tabitha. She would say a poem:

*Little lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?*

There was more of this, but I have forgotten it.

As for Jemima, that name came from a story in the Bible. Jemima was a very special little girl because her father, Job, was sent bad luck by God as part of a test, and the worst part of it was that all Job's children were killed. All his sons, all his daughters: killed! It sent shudders through me every time I heard about it. It must have been terrible, what Job felt when he was told that news.

But Job passed the test, and God gave him some other children—several sons, and also three daughters—so then he was happy again. And Jemima was one of those daughters. "God gave her to Job, just as God gave you to me," said my mother.

"Did you have bad luck? Before you chose me?"

“Yes, I did,” she said, smiling.

“Did you pass the test?”

“I must have,” said my mother. “Or I wouldn’t have been able to choose a wonderful daughter like you.”

I was pleased with this story. It was only later that I pondered it: how could Job have allowed God to fob off a batch of new children on him and expect him to pretend that the dead ones no longer mattered?

When I wasn’t at school or with my mother—and I was with my mother less and less, because more and more she would be upstairs lying down on her bed, doing what the Marthas called “resting”—I liked to be in the kitchen, watching the Marthas make the bread and the cookies and pies and cakes and soups and stews. All the Marthas were known as Martha because that’s what they were, and they all wore the same kind of clothing, but each one of them had a first name too. Ours were Vera, Rosa, and Zilla; we had three Marthas because my father was so important. Zilla was my favourite because she spoke very softly, whereas Vera had a harsh voice and Rosa had a scowl. It wasn’t her fault though, it was just the way her face was made. She was older than the other two.

“Can I help?” I would ask our Marthas. Then they would give me scraps of bread dough to play with, and I would make a man out of dough, and they would bake it in the oven with whatever else they were baking. I always made dough men, I never made dough women, because after they were baked I would eat them, and that made me feel I had a secret power over men. It was becoming clear to me that, despite the urges Aunt Vidala said I aroused in them, I had no power over them otherwise.

“Can I make the bread from scratch?” I asked one day when Zilla was getting out the bowl to start mixing. I’d watched them do it so often that I was convinced I knew how.

“You don’t need to bother with that,” said Rosa, scowling more than usual.

“Why?” I said.

Vera laughed her harsh laugh. “You’ll have Marthas to do all of that for you,” she said. “Once they’ve picked out a nice fat husband for you.”

“He won’t be fat.” I didn’t want a fat husband.

“Of course not. It’s just an expression,” said Zilla.

“You won’t have to do the shopping either,” said Rosa. “Your Martha will do that. Or else a Handmaid, supposing you need one.”

“She may not need one,” said Vera. “Considering who her mother—”

“Don’t say that,” said Zilla.

“What?” I said. “What about my mother?” I knew there was a secret about my mother—it had to do with the way they said *resting*—and it frightened me.

“Just that your mother could have her own baby,” said Zilla soothingly, “so I’m sure you can too. You’d like to have a baby, wouldn’t you, dear?”

“Yes,” I said, “but I don’t want a husband. I think they’re disgusting.” The three of them laughed.

“Not all of them,” said Zilla. “Your father is a husband.” There was nothing I could say about that.

“They’ll make sure it’s a nice one,” said Rosa. “It won’t be just any old husband.”

“They have their pride to keep up,” said Vera. “They won’t marry you down, that’s for sure.”

I didn’t want to think about husbands any longer. “But what if I want to?” I said. “Make the bread?” My feelings were hurt: it was as if they were closing a circle around themselves, keeping me out. “What if I want to make the bread myself?”

“Well, of course, your Marthas would have to let you do that,” said Zilla. “You’d be the mistress of the household. But they’d look down on you for it. And they’d feel you were taking their rightful positions away from them. The things they know best how to do. You wouldn’t want them to feel that about you, would you, dear?”

“Your husband wouldn’t like it either,” said Vera with another of her harsh laughs. “It’s bad for the hands. Look at mine!” She held

them out: her fingers were knobby, the skin was rough, the nails short, with ragged cuticles—not at all like my mother’s slender and elegant hands, with their magic ring. “Rough work—it’s all bad for the hands. He won’t want you smelling of bread dough.”

“Or bleach,” said Rosa. “From scrubbing.”

“He’ll want you to stick to the embroidery and such,” said Vera.

“The petit point,” said Rosa. There was derision in her voice.

Embroidery was not my strong suit. I was always being criticized for loose and sloppy stitches. “I hate petit point. I want to make bread.”

“We can’t always do what we want,” said Zilla gently. “Even you.”

“And sometimes we have to do what we hate,” said Vera. “Even you.”

“Don’t let me, then!” I said. “You’re being mean!” And I ran out of the kitchen.

By this time I was crying. Although I’d been told not to disturb my mother, I crept upstairs and into her room. She was under her lovely white coverlet with blue flowers. Her eyes were closed but she must have heard me because she opened them. Every time I saw her, those eyes looked larger and more luminous.

“What is it, my pet?” she said.

I crawled under the coverlet and snuggled up against her. She was very warm.

“It’s not fair,” I sobbed. “I don’t want to get married! Why do I have to?”

She didn’t say *Because it’s your duty*, the way Aunt Vidala would have, or *You’ll want to when the time comes*, which was what Aunt Estée would say. She didn’t say anything at first. Instead she hugged me and stroked my hair.

“Remember how I chose you,” she said, “out of all the others.”

But I was old enough now to disbelieve the choosing story: the locked castle, the magic ring, the wicked witches, the running away. “That’s only a fairy tale,” I said. “I came out of your stomach, just like other babies.” She did not affirm this. She said nothing. For some reason this was frightening to me.

“I did! Didn’t I?” I asked. “Shunammite told me. At school. About stomachs.”

My mother hugged me tighter. “Whatever happens,” she said after a while, “I want you to always remember that I have loved you very much.”

You have probably guessed what I am going to tell you next, and it is not at all happy.

My mother was dying. Everyone knew, except me.

I found out from Shunammite, who said she was my best friend. We weren't supposed to have best friends. It wasn't nice to form closed circles, said Aunt Estée: it made other girls feel left out, and we should all be helping one another be the most perfect girls we could be.

Aunt Vidala said that best friends led to whispering and plotting and keeping secrets, and plotting and secrets led to disobedience to God, and disobedience led to rebellion, and girls who were rebellious became women who were rebellious, and a rebellious woman was even worse than a rebellious man because rebellious men became traitors, but rebellious women became adulteresses.

Then Becka spoke up in her mouse voice and asked, What is an adulteress? We girls were all surprised because Becka so seldom asked any questions. Her father was not a Commander like our fathers. He was only a dentist: the very best dentist, and our families all went to him, which was why Becka was allowed into our school. But it did mean the other girls looked down on her and expected her to defer to them.

Becka was sitting beside me—she always tried to sit beside me if Shunammite did not shoulder her away—and I could feel her trem-

bling. I was afraid that Aunt Vidala would punish her for being impertinent, but it would have been hard for anyone, even Aunt Vidala, to accuse her of impertinence.

Shunammite whispered across me at Becka: *Don't be so stupid!* Aunt Vidala smiled, as much as she ever did, and said she hoped Becka would never find that out through personal experience, since those who did become adulteresses would end up being stoned or else hanged by their neck with a sack over their heads. Aunt Estée said there was no need to frighten the girls unduly; and then she smiled and said that we were precious flowers, and who ever heard of a rebellious flower?

We looked at her, making our eyes as round as possible as a sign of our innocence, and nodding to show we agreed with her. No rebellious flowers here!

Shunammite's house had just one Martha and mine had three, so my father was more important than hers. I realize now that this was why she wanted me as her best friend. She was a stubby girl with two long thick braids that I envied, since my own braids were skinny and shorter, and black eyebrows that made her look more grown up than she was. She was belligerent, but only behind the Aunts' backs. In the disputes between us, she always had to be right. If you contradicted her, she would only repeat her first opinion, except louder. She was rude to many other girls, especially Becka, and I am ashamed to tell you that I was too weak to overrule her. I had a weak character when dealing with girls my own age, though at home the Marthas would say I was headstrong.

"Your mother's dying, isn't she?" Shunammite whispered to me one lunchtime.

"No she's not," I whispered back. "She just has a condition!" That was what the Marthas called it: *your mother's condition*. Her condition was what caused her to rest so much, and to cough. Lately our Marthas had been taking trays up to her room; the trays would come back down with hardly anything eaten from the plates.

I wasn't allowed to visit her much anymore. When I did, her room would be in semi-darkness. It no longer smelled like her, a light, sweet smell like the lily-flowered hostas in our garden, but as if some stale and dirtied stranger had crept in and was hiding under the bed.

I would sit beside my mother where she lay huddled under her blue-flower-embroidered bedspread and hold her thin left hand with the magic ring on it and ask when her condition would be gone, and she would say she was praying for her pain to be over soon. That would reassure me: it meant she would get better. Then she would ask me if I was being good, and if I was happy, and I would always say yes, and she would squeeze my hand and ask me to pray with her, and we would sing the song about the angels standing around her bed. And she would say thank you, and that was enough for today.

"She really is dying," Shunammite whispered. "That's what her condition is. It's dying!"

"That's not true," I whispered too loudly. "She's getting better. Her pain will be over soon. She prayed for it."

"Girls," said Aunt Estée. "At lunchtime our mouths are for eating, and we can't talk and chew at the same time. Aren't we lucky to have such lovely food?" It was egg sandwiches, which ordinarily I liked. But right then the smell of them was making me feel sick.

"I heard it from my Martha," Shunammite whispered when Aunt Estée's attention was elsewhere. "And your Martha told her. So it's true."

"Which one?" I said. I couldn't believe any of our Marthas would be so disloyal as to pretend that my mother was dying—not even scowling Rosa.

"How should I know which one? They're all just Marthas," said Shunammite, tossing her long thick braids.

That afternoon when our Guardian had driven me home from school, I went into the kitchen. Zilla was rolling pie dough; Vera was cutting up a chicken. There was a soup pot simmering on the back of

the stove: the extra chicken parts would go into it, and any vegetable scraps and bones. Our Marthas were very efficient with food, and did not waste supplies.

Rosa was over at the large double sink rinsing off dishes. We had a dishwasher, but the Marthas didn't use it except after Commanders' dinners at our house because it took too much electricity, said Vera, and there were shortages because of the war. Sometimes the Marthas called it the watched-pot war because it never boiled, or else the Ezekiel's Wheel war because it rolled around without getting anywhere; but they only said such things among themselves.

"Shunammite said one of you told her Martha that my mother is dying," I blurted out. "Who said that? It's a lie!"

All three of them stopped doing what they were doing. It was as if I'd waved a wand and frozen them: Zilla with the lifted rolling pin, Vera with a cleaver in one hand and a long pale chicken neck in the other, Rosa with a platter and a dishcloth. Then they looked at one another.

"We thought you knew," Zilla said gently. "We thought your mother would have told you."

"Or your father," said Vera. That was silly, because when could he have done that? He was hardly ever at our house nowadays, and when he was, he was either eating dinner by himself in the dining room or shut inside his study doing important things.

"We're very sorry," said Rosa. "Your mother is a good woman."

"A model Wife," said Vera. "She has endured her suffering without complaint." By this time I was slumped over at the kitchen table, crying into my hands.

"We must all bear the afflictions that are sent to test us," said Zilla. "We must continue to hope."

Hope for what? I thought. What was there left to hope for? All I could see in front of me was loss and darkness.

My mother died two nights later, though I didn't find out until the morning. I was angry with her for being mortally ill and not telling

me—though she had told me, in a way: she had prayed for her pain to be over soon, and her prayer was answered.

Once I'd finished being angry, I felt as if a piece of me had been cut off—a piece of my heart, which was surely now dead as well. I hoped that the four angels round her bed were real after all, and that they had watched over her, and that they had carried her soul away, just as in the song. I tried to picture them lifting her up and up, into a golden cloud. But I could not really believe it.

III

Hymn



The Ardua Hall Holograph

6

Readying myself for bed last night, I unpinned my hair, what is left of it. In one of my bracing homilies to our Aunts some years ago, I preached against vanity, which creeps in despite our strictures against it. “Life is not about hair,” I said then, only half jocularly. Which is true, but it is also true that hair is about life. It is the flame of the body’s candle, and as it dwindles the body shrinks and melts away. I once had enough hair for a topknot, in the days of topknots; for a bun, in the age of buns. But now my hair is like our meals here at Ardua Hall: sparse and short. The flame of my life is subsiding, more slowly than some of those around me might like, but faster than they may realize.

I regarded my reflection. The inventor of the mirror did few of us any favours: we must have been happier before we knew what we looked like. It could be worse, I told myself: my face betrays no signs of weakness. It retains its leathery texture, its character-bestowing mole on the chin, its etching of familiar lines. I was never frivolously pretty, but I was once handsome: that can no longer be said. *Imposing* is the best that might be ventured.

How will I end? I wondered. Will I live to a gently neglected old age, ossifying by degrees? Will I become my own honoured statue? Or will the regime and I both topple and my stone replica along with me, to be dragged away and sold off as a curiosity, a lawn ornament, a chunk of gruesome kitsch?

Or will I be put on trial as a monster, then executed by firing squad

and dangled from a lamppost for public viewing? Will I be torn apart by a mob and have my head stuck on a pole and paraded through the streets to merriment and jeers? I have inspired sufficient rage for that.

Right now I still have some choice in the matter. Not whether to die, but when and how. Isn't that freedom of a sort?

Oh, and who to take down with me. I have made my list.

I am well aware of how you must be judging me, my reader; if, that is, my reputation has preceded me and you have deciphered who I am, or was.

In my own present day I am a legend, alive but more than alive, dead but more than dead. I'm a framed head that hangs at the backs of classrooms, of the girls exalted enough to have classrooms: grimly smiling, silently admonishing. I'm a bugaboo used by the Marthas to frighten small children—*If you don't behave yourself, Aunt Lydia will come and get you!* I'm also a model of moral perfection to be emulated—*What would Aunt Lydia want you to do?*—and a judge and arbiter in the misty inquisition of the imagination—*What would Aunt Lydia have to say about that?*

I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it—formless, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow. How can I regain myself? How to shrink back to my normal size, the size of an ordinary woman?

But perhaps it is too late for that. You take the first step, and to save yourself from the consequences, you take the next one. In times like ours, there are only two directions: up or plummet.

Today was the first full moon after March 21. Elsewhere in the world, lambs are being slaughtered and eaten; Easter eggs, too, are consumed, for reasons having to do with Neolithic fertility goddesses nobody chooses to remember.