

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) (chap. 4)

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Praise be," I reply.

"We've been sent good weather."

"Which I receive with joy."

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

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

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

"Praise be."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Doing their job, said Cora. Keeping us safe.

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

It was an accident, said Cora.

No such thing, said Rita. Everything is meant. I could hear her thumping the pots around, in the sink. Well, someone'll think twice before blowing up this house, anyways, said Cora.

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

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

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

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

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

In returning my pass, the one with the peach-coloured moustache bends his head to try to get a look at my face. I raise my head a little, to help him, and he sees my eyes and I see his, and he blushes. His face is long and mournful, like a sheep's, but with the large full eyes of a dog, spaniel not terrier. His skin is pale and looks unwholesomely tender, like the skin under a scab. Nevertheless, I think of placing my hand on it, this exposed face. He is the one who turns away.

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