

Meeting the Wife

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 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. (...) 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 post 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. (...)

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. (...)

Yes, I said.

Leave it on the porch. She said this to the Guardian, who was carrying my bag. The bag was red vinyl and not large. There was another bag, with the winter cloak and 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. (...)

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(...). 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 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.

Margaret Atwood, *The handmaid's Tale*, chapter 4, 1985