

Performing the Ceremony

The Ceremony goes as usual.

I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underdrawers. (...)

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 thigh 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? (...)

He comes at last, with a stifled 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, rezipper. 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?

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Chapter 16) 1985