

I June go goes 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 her shatterproof window I June have has 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 June once had a garden. I she 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 June start starts to wonder where she is: I she do does not 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 June 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 June think thinks 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 June envy envies the Commander's Wife her knitting. It's good to have small goals that can be easily attained.

What does she the Commander's Wife envy me June?

She doesn't speak to me June, unless she can't avoid it. I June am is a reproach to her; and a necessity.

We they stood face to face for the first time five weeks ago, when I June arrived at this posting. The Guardian from the previous posting brought me her to the front door. On first days we they are permitted front doors, but after that we they're supposed to use the back. Things haven't

settled down, it's too soon, everyone is unsure about **our their** 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 June**, 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 June** was expecting a Martha, but it was **her the Commander's Wife** instead, in **her** long powder-blue robe, unmistakable.

So, you're the new one, **she** said. **She** didn't step aside to let **me her** in, **she** just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. **She** wanted **me June** to feel that **I she** could not come into the house unless **she the Wife** said so. There is push and shove, these days, over such footholds.

Yes, **I June** said.

Leave it on the porch. **She The Wife** said this to **the Guardian**, who was carrying **my June's** 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 June** could hear **his** footsteps behind **me her**, going back down the walk, and the click of the front gate, and **I she** felt as if a protective arm were being withdrawn. The threshold of a new house is a lonely place.

She The Commander's Wife waited until the car started up and pulled away. **I June** was not looking at **her** face, but at the part of **her I she** could see with **my her** 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 knuckly 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 June** and limped down the hall. Shut the door behind you.

I June lifted **my her** red bag inside, as **she the Wife** had no doubt intended, then closed the door. **I she** did not say anything to **her the Wife**. **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 June** 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 June 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 June thought, and this gave me her 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 June have, to trade?

I June looked at the cigarette with longing. For me her, like liquor and coffee, they are forbidden.

“ So old what's his face didn't work out, ” she the Commander's Wife said.

No, ma'am, I June 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 June 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 June did sit, on the edge of one of the stiff backed chairs. I she did not want to stare around the room, I she did not want to appear inattentive to her the Wife; so the marble mantelpiece to my her right and the mirror over it and the bunches of flowers were just shadows, then, at the edges of my her eyes. Later I she would have more than enough time to take them in.

Now her the Commander's Wife's face was on a level with mine hers. I June thought I she 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 June thought then that maybe she bleached it, that hair dye was something else she could get through the black market, but I she know knows 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 June did not 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 June said.

“ Don’t call me ma’am, ” she said irritably. “ You’re not a Martha. ”

I June did not ask what I she was supposed to call her, because I she could see that she hoped I June would never have the occasion to call her anything at all. I June was disappointed. I she wanted, then, to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me her. The Wife in my her posting before this had spent most of her time in her bedroom; the Marthas said she drank. I June wanted this one to be different. I she wanted to think I she would have liked her, in another time and place, another life. But I she could see already that I she would not have liked her, nor she the Wife me her.

She The Commander’s Wife 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 June said again, forgetting. They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I June thought I she was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll. She The Wife probably longed to slap my her face. They can hit us them, 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 June, she was looking down at her knuckled, diamond studded hands, and I June knew where I she had seen her before.

The first time was on television, when I June was eight or nine. It was when my her mother was sleeping in, on Sunday mornings, and I June would get up early and go to the television set in my her mother’s study and flip through the channels, looking for cartoons. Sometimes when I she could not find any I she 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 her** was **Serena Joy**. Or had been, once. So it was worse than **I she** thought.

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

"Blessed be the fruit," **she the woman** says to **me her**, the accepted greeting among **us them**.

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

This woman has been **my her** partner for two weeks. **I June do does** not 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 June am is**. **Her** eyes are brown. **Her** name is Ofglen, and that's about all **I June know knows** 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 has I June**. **She** may be a real believer, a Handmaid in more than name. **I June** can not take the risk.

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

"Praise be," **I June reply replies**.

"We've been sent good weather."

"Which I receive with joy."

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

"Praise be," **I June say says**. **I she do does** not ask **her** how **she** knows. "What were they?"

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

“ Praise be. ”

When the night for the Ceremony came round again, two or three weeks later, I June found that things were changed. There was an awkwardness now that there hadn't been before. Before, I she would treated it as a job, an unpleasant job to be gone through as fast as possible so it could be over with. Steel yourself, my her mother used to say, before examinations I June did not want to take or swims in cold water. I she never thought much at the time about what the phrase meant, but it had something to do with metal, with armor, and that's what I she would do, I she would steel myself herself. I she would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh.

This state of absence, of existing apart from the body, had been true of the Commander too, I June knew now. Probably he thought about other things the whole time he was with me her; with us them, for of course Serena Joy was there on those evenings also. He might have been thinking about what he did during the day, or about playing golf, or about what he'd had for dinner. The sexual act, although he performed it in a perfunctory way, must have been largely unconscious, for him, like scratching himself.

But that night, the first since the beginning of whatever this new arrangement was between us them - I June had no name for it - I she felt shy of him. I she felt, for one thing, that he was actually looking at me her, and I she did not like it. The lights were on, as usual, since Serena Joy always avoided anything that would have created an aura of romance or eroticism, however slight: overhead lights, harsh despite the canopy. It was like being on an operating table, in the full glare; like being on a stage. I June was conscious that my her legs were hairy, in the straggly way of legs that have once been shaved but have grown back; I she was conscious of my her armpits too, although of course he couldn't see them. I she felt uncouth. This act of copulation, fertilization perhaps, which should have been no more to me her than a bee is to a flower, had become for me her indecorous, an embarrassing breach of propriety, which it hadn't been before.

He was no longer a thing to me her. That was the problem. I June realized it that night, and the realization has stayed with me her. It complicates.

Serena Joy had changed for me her, too. Once I June had merely hated her for her part in what was being done to me her; and because she Serena hated me her too and resented my her presence, and because she would be the one to raise my her child, should I June be able to have one after all. But now, although I June still hated her, no more so than when she Serena was gripping my her hands so hard that her rings bit my her flesh, pulling my her hands back as well, which she must have done on purpose to make me her as uncomfortable as she could, the hatred was no longer pure and simple. Partly I June was jealous of her; but how could I June be

jealous of a woman so obviously dried up and unhappy? You can only be jealous of someone who has something you think you ought to have yourself. Nevertheless I June was jealous.

But I June also felt guilty about her. I she felt I she was an intruder, in a territory that ought to have been hers Serena's. Now that I June was seeing the Commander on the sly, if only to play his games and listen to him talk, our their functions were no longer as separate as they should have been in theory. I she was taking something away from her Serena, although she Serena didn't know it. I June was filching. Never mind that it was something she Serena apparently didn't want or had no use for, had rejected even; still, it was hers, and if I June took it away, this mysterious "it" I she could not quite define - for the Commander wasn't in love with me June, I she refused to believe he felt anything for me her as extreme as that - what would be left for her Serena?

"Why should I care?" I she told myself herself. "She's nothing to me, she dislikes me, she'd have me out of the house in a minute, or worse, if she could think up any excuse at all. If she were to find out, for instance." He wouldn't be able to intervene, to save me June; the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone. She Serena was a malicious and vengeful woman, I June knew that. Nevertheless I June could not shake it, that small compunction towards her.

Also: I June now had power over her, of a kind, although she Serena didn't know it. And I June enjoyed that. Why pretend? I she enjoyed it a lot.

But the Commander could give me her away so easily, by a look, by a gesture, some tiny slip that would reveal to anyone watching that there was something between us them now. He almost did it the night of the Ceremony. He reached his hand up as if to touch my her face; I June moved my her head to the side, to warn him away, hoping Serena Joy hadn't noticed, and he withdrew his hand again, withdrew into himself and his single minded journey.

"Don't do that again," I June said to him the next time we they were alone.

"Do what?" he said.

"Try to touch me like that, when we're ... when she's there."

"Did I?" he said.

"You could get me transferred," I June said. "To the Colonies. You know that. Or worse." I she thought he should continue to act, in public, as if I she were a large vase or a window: part of the background, inanimate or transparent.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to. But I find it ..."

“ What? ” I June said, when he didn’t go on.

“ Impersonal, ” he said.

“ How long did it take you to find that out? ” I she said. You can see from the way I she was speaking to him that we they were already on different terms.

I June do does not feel like a nap this afternoon, there’s still too much adrenaline. I she sit sits on the window seat, looking out through the semisheer of the curtains. White nightgown. The window is as open as it goes, there’s a breeze, hot in the sunlight, and the white cloth blows across my her face. From the outside I she must look like a cocoon, a spook, face enshrouded like this, only the outlines visible, of nose, bandaged mouth, blind eyes. But I she like likes the sensation, the soft cloth brushing my her skin. It’s like being in a cloud.

They have given me her a small electric fan, which helps in this humidity. It whirs on the floor, in the corner, its blades encased in grillework. If I she were Moira, I she would know how to take it apart, reduce it to its cutting edges. I she have has no screwdriver, but if I she were Moira I she could do it without a screwdriver. I she am is not Moira.

What would she Moira tell me her, about the Commander, if she were here? Probably she’d disapprove. She disapproved of Luke, back then. Not of Luke but of the fact that he was married. She said I June was poaching, on another woman’s ground. I June said Luke wasn’t a fish or a piece of dirt either, he was a human being and could make his own decisions. She Moira said I June was rationalizing. I June said I she was in love. She Moira said that was no excuse. Moira was always more logical than I she am is.

I June said she Moira didn’t have that problem herself anymore, since she’d decided to prefer women, and as far as I June could see she had no scruples about stealing them or borrowing them when she felt like it. She Moira said it was different, because the balance of power was equal between women so sex was an even steven transaction. I June said “ even steven ” was a sexist phrase, if she was going to be like that, and anyway that argument was outdated. She Moira said I June had trivialized the issue and if I June thought it was outdated I she was living with my her head in the sand.

We they said all this in my June’s kitchen, drinking coffee, sitting at my her kitchen table, in those low, intense voices we they used for such arguments when we they were in our their early twenties; a carry over from college. The kitchen was in a rundown apartment in a clapboard house near the river, the kind with three stories and a rickety outside back staircase. I June had the second floor, which meant I she got noise from both above and below, two unwanted disc players thumping late into the night. Students, I she knew. I she was still on my her first job, which didn’t pay much: I she worked a computer in an insurance company. So the hotels, with

Luke, didn't mean only love or even only sex to **me her**. They also meant time off from the cockroaches, the dripping sink, the linoleum that was peeling off the floor in patches, even from **my her** own attempts to brighten things up by sticking posters on the wall and hanging prisms in the windows. **I she** had plants, too; though they always got spider mites or died from being unwatered. **I she** would go off with **Luke**, and neglect them.

I June said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if **Moir** thought **she** could create Utopia by shutting **herself** up in a women only enclave **she** was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, **I June** said. You couldn't just ignore them.

That's like saying you should go out and catch syphilis merely because it exists, **Moir** said.

Are you calling **Luke** a social disease? **I June** said.

Moir laughed. "Listen to us," **she** said. "Shit. We sound like your mother."

We they both laughed then, and when **she Moir** left **we they** hugged each other as usual. There was a time when **we they** didn't hug, after **she Moir** had told **me her** about being gay; but then **she Moir** said **I June** did not turn **her** on, reassuring **me her**, and **we they**'d gone back to it. **We they** could fight and wrangle and name-call, but it didn't change anything underneath. **She** was still **my her** oldest friend. Is.

I June leave **leaves Ofgen** at the corner. "I'll see you later," **she Ofgen** says. **She** glides away along the sidewalk and **I June** go **goes** up the walk towards the house. There's **Nick**, hat askew; today **he** doesn't even look at **me her**. **He** must have been waiting around for **me her** though, to deliver **his** silent message, because as soon as **he** knows **I she have has** seen **him he** gives the Whirlwind one last swipe with the chamois and walks briskly off towards the garage door.

I June walk **walks** along the gravel, between the slabs of overgreen lawn. **Serena Joy** is sitting under the willow tree, in **her** chair, cane propped at **her** elbow. **Her** dress is crisp cool cotton. For **her** it's blue, watercolor, not this red of **mine June's** that sucks in heat and blazes with it at the same time. **Her** profile's towards **me June**, **she's** knitting. How can **she** bear to touch the wool, in this heat? But possibly **her** skin's gone numb; possibly **she** feels nothing, like one formerly scalded.

I June lower **lowers** **my her** eyes to the path, **glide glides** by **her Serena**, hoping to be invisible, knowing **I she** will be ignored. But not this time.

"Offred," **she** says.

I June pause **pauses**, uncertain.

“ Yes, you. ”

I **June** turn **turns** towards my **her** blinkered sight.

“ Come over here. I want you. ”

I **June** walk **walks** over the grass and **stand** **stands** before **her**, looking down.

“ You can sit, ” **she** says. “ Here, take the cushion. I need you to hold this wool. ” **She**’s got a cigarette, the ashtray’s on the lawn beside **her**, and a cup of something, tea or coffee. “ It’s too damn close in there. You need a little air, ” **she** says. I **June** sit **sits**, putting down my **her** basket, strawberries again, chicken again, and I **she** note **notes** the swear word: something new. **She** **Serena** fits the skein of wool over my **June**’s two outstretched hands, starts winding. I **June** am **is** leashed, it looks like, manacled; cobwebbed, that’s closer. The wool is gray and has absorbed moisture from the air, it’s like a wetted baby blanket and smells faintly of damp sheep. At least my **her** hands will get lanolined.

Serena winds, the cigarette held in the corner of **her** mouth smoldering, sending out tempting smoke. **She** winds slowly and with difficulty because of **her** gradually crippling hands, but with determination. Perhaps the knitting, for **her**, involves a kind of willpower; maybe it even hurts. Maybe it’s been medically prescribed: ten rows a day of plain, ten of purl. Though **she** must do more than that. I **June** see **sees** those evergreen trees and geometric boys and girls in a different light: evidence of **her** stubbornness, and not altogether despicable.

My **June**’s mother did not knit or anything like that. But whenever **she** would bring things back from the cleaner’s, **her** good blouses, winter coats, **she**’d save up the safety pins and make them into a chain. Then **she**’d pin the chain somewhere - **her** bed, the pillow, a chair back, the oven mitt in the kitchen - so **she** wouldn’t lose them. Then **she**’d forget about them. I **June** would come upon them, here and there in the house, the houses; tracks of **her** presence, remnants of some lost intention, like signs on a road that turns out to lead nowhere. Throwbacks to domesticity.

“ Well then, ” **Serena** says. **She** stops winding, leaving me **June** with my **her** hands still garlanded with animal hair, and takes the cigarette end from **her** mouth to butt it out. “ Nothing yet? ”

I **June** know **knows** what **she**’s talking about. There are not that many subjects that could be spoken about, between us **them**; there’s not much common ground, except this one mysterious and chancy thing.

“ No, ” I she say says. “ Nothing. ”

“ Too bad, ” she Serena says. It’s hard to imagine her with a baby. But the Marthas would take care of it mostly. She’d like me June pregnant though, over and done with and out of the way, no more humiliating sweaty tangles, no more flesh triangles under her starry canopy of silver flowers. Peace and quiet. I June can not imagine she Serena would want such good luck, for me June, for any other reason.

“ Your time’s running out, ” she Serena says. Not a question, a matter of fact.

“ Yes, ” I June say says neutrally.

She’s lighting another cigarette, fumbling with the lighter. Definitely her hands are getting worse. But it would be a mistake to offer to do it for her, she’d be offended. A mistake to notice weakness in her.

“ Maybe he can’t, ” she says.

I June do does not know who she Serena means. Does she mean the Commander, or God? If it’s God, she should say *will not*. Either way it’s heresy. It’s only women who can’t, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective.

“ No, ” I June say says. “ Maybe he can’t. ”

I she look looks up at her Serena. She Serena looks down. It’s the first time we they’ve looked into each other’s eyes in a long time. Since we they met. The moment stretches out between us them, bleak and level. She Serena’s trying to see whether or not I June am is up to reality.

“ Maybe, ” she says, holding the cigarette, which she has failed to light. “ Maybe you should try it another way. ”

Does she mean on all fours? “ What other way? ” I June say says. I she must keep serious.

“ Another man, ” she says.

“ You know I can’t, ” I June say says, careful not to let my her irritation show. “ It’s against the law. You know the penalty. ”

“ Yes, ” she Serena says. She’s ready for this, she’s thought it through. “ I know you can’t officially. But it’s done. Women do it frequently. All the time. ”

“ With doctors, you mean? ” I June say says, remembering the sympathetic brown eyes, the gloveless hand. The last time I she went it was a different doctor. Maybe someone caught him out, or a woman reported him. Not that they’d take her word, without evidence.

“ Some do that, ” she says, her tone almost affable now, though distanced; it’s as if we they’re considering a choice of nail polish. “ That’s how Ofwarren did it. The Wife knew, of course. ” She pauses to let this sink in. “ I would help you. I would make sure nothing went wrong. ”

I June think thinks about this. “ Not with a doctor, ” I she say says.

“ No, ” she Serena agrees, and for this moment at least we they are cronies, this could be a kitchen table, it could be a date we they’re discussing, some girlish stratagem of ploys and flirtation. “ Sometimes they blackmail. But it doesn’t have to be a doctor. It could be someone we trust. ”

“ Who? ” I June say says.

“ I was thinking of Nick, ” she Serena says, and her voice is almost soft. “ He’s been with us a long time. He’s loyal. I could fix it with him. ”

So that’s who does her little black market errands for her. Is this what he always gets, in return?

“ What about the Commander? ” I June say says.

“ Well, ” she says, with firmness; no, more than that, a clenched look, like a purse snapping shut. “ We just will not tell him, will we? ”

This idea hangs between us them, almost visible, almost palpable: heavy, formless, dark; collusion of a sort, betrayal of a sort. She does want that baby.

“ It’s a risk, ” I June say says. “ More than that. ” It’s my her life on the line; but that’s where it will be sooner or later, one way or another, whether I she do does or do does not. We they both know this.

“ You might as well, ” she Serena says. Which is what I June think thinks too.

“ All right, ” I June say says. “ Yes. ”

She Serena leans forward. “ Maybe I could get something for you, ” she says. Because I June have has been good. “ Something you want, ” she adds, wheedling almost.

“ What’s that? ” I June say says. I she can not think of anything I she truly want wants that she Serena would be likely or able to give me her.

“ A picture, ” she Serena says, as if offering me her some juvenile treat, an ice cream, a trip to the zoo. I June look looks up at her again, puzzled.

“ Of her, ” she says. “ Your little girl. But only maybe. ”

She knows where they’ve put her then, where they’re keeping her. She’s known all along. Something chokes in my June’s throat. The bitch, not to tell me her, bring me her news, any news at all. Not even to let on. She’s made of wood, or iron, she can’t imagine. But I June can not say this, I she can not lose sight, even of so small a thing. I she can not let go of this hope. I she can not speak.

She Serena’s actually smiling, coquettishly even; there’s a hint of her former small screen mannequin’s allure, flickering over her face like momentary static. “ It’s too damn hot for this, don’t you think? ” she says. She lifts the wool from my June’s two hands, where I June have has been holding it all this time. Then she takes the cigarette she’s been fiddling with and, a little awkwardly, presses it into my June’s hand, closing my her fingers around it. “ Find yourself a match, ” she says. “ They’re in the kitchen, you can ask Rita for one. You can tell her I said so. Only the one though, ” she adds roguishly. “ We don’t want to ruin your health! ”

Then I she see sees her. Moira. She’s standing with two other women, over near the fountain. I June have has to look hard, again, to make sure it’s her; I she do does this in pulses, quick flickers of the eyes, so no one will notice.

She Moira’s dressed absurdly, in a black outfit of once shiny satin that looks the worse for wear. It’s strapless, wired from the inside, pushing up the breasts, but it doesn’t quite fit Moira, it’s too large, so that one breast is plumped out and the other one isn’t. She’s tugging absent-mindedly at the top, pulling it up. There’s a wad of cotton attached to the back, I June can see it as she Moira half turns; it looks like a sanitary pad that’s been popped like a piece of popcorn. I June realize realizes that it’s supposed to be a tail. Attached to her head are two ears, of a rabbit or deer, it’s not easy to tell; one of the ears has lost its starch or wiring and is flopping halfway down. She has a black bow tie around her neck and is wearing black net stockings and black high heels. She always hated high heels.

The whole costume, antique and bizarre, reminds me June of something from the past, but I she can not think what. A stage play, a musical comedy? Girls dressed for Easter, in rabbit suits. What is the significance of it here, why are rabbits supposed to be sexually attractive to men? How can this bedraggled costume appeal?

Moira is smoking a cigarette. **She** takes a drag, passes it to **the woman** on **her** left, who's in red spangles with a long pointed tail attached, and silver horns; a devil outfit. Now **she** has **her** arms folded across **her** front, under **her** wired up breasts. **She** stands on one foot, then the other, **her** feet must hurt; **her** spine sags slightly. **She** gazes without interest or speculation around the room. This must be familiar scenery.

I June will **wills** **her Moira** to look at **me her**, to see **me her**, but **her Moira's** eyes slide over **me her** as if **I she am is** just another palm tree, another chair. Surely **she** must turn, **I June am is** willing so hard, **she Moira** must look at **me her**, before one of the men comes over to **her**, before **she** disappears. Already **the other women** with **her**, the blonde in the short pink bed jacket with the tatty fur trim, has been appropriated, has entered the glass elevator, has ascended out of sight. **Moira** swivels **her** head around again, checking perhaps for prospects. It must be hard to stand there unclaimed, as if **she's** at a high school dance, being looked over. This time **her** eyes snag on **me June**. **She** sees **me her**. **She** knows enough not to react.

We they stare at one another, keeping **our their** faces blank, apathetic. Then **she** makes a small motion of **her** head, a slight jerk to the right. **She** takes the cigarette back from **the woman** in red, holds it to **her** mouth, lets **her** hand rest in the air a moment, all five fingers outspread. Then **she** turns **her** back on **me June**.

Our their old signal. **I June have has** five minutes to get to the women's washroom, which must be somewhere to **her** right. **I she look looks** around: no sign of it. Nor can **I she** risk getting up and walking anywhere, without **the Commander**. **I she do does** not know enough, **I she do does** not know the ropes, **I she** might be challenged.

A minute, two. **Moira** begins to saunter off, not glancing around. **She** can only hope **I June have has** understood **her** and will follow.

The Commander comes back, with two drinks. **He** smiles down at **me her**, places the drinks on the long black coffee table in front of the sofa, sits. "Enjoying yourself?" **he** says. **He** wants **me her** to. This after all is a treat.

I June smile smiles at **him**. "Is there a washroom?" **I she say says**.

"Of course," **he** says. **He** sips at **his** drink. **He** does not volunteer directions.

"I need to go to it." **I she am is** counting in **my her** head now, seconds, not minutes.

"It's over there." **He** nods.

"What if someone stops me?"

“ Just show them your tag, ” **he** says. “ It’ll be all right. They’ll know you’re taken. ”

I she get gets up, wobble **wobbles** across the room. **I she lurch lurches** a little, near the fountain, almost **fall falls**. It’s the heels. Without **the Commander’s** arm to steady **me her I she am is** off balance. Several of the men look at **me her**, with surprise **I June think thinks** rather than lust. **I she feel feels** like a fool. **I she hold holds my her** left arm conspicuously in front of **me her**, bent at the elbow, with the tag turned outward. Nobody says anything.