**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 toeholds.

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. Idon’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. Myhusband. Iwant that to be perfectly clear. Till death do uspart. 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, Ihear, ” **she** **her partner** says.

“ Praise be, ” **I June** **reply** **replies**.

“ We’ve been sent good weather. ”

“ Which Ireceive 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 Icare? ” **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 metransferred, ” **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 Ifind 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** notfeel 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 **Moira** 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, **Moira** said.

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

**Moira** laughed. “ Listen to us, ” **she** said. “ Shit. Wesound like your mother. ”

**We they** both laughed then, and when **she** **Moira** left **we they** hugged each other as usual. There was a time when **we they** didn’t hug, after **she** **Moira** had told **me her** about being gay; but then **she** **Moira** 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** **Ofglen** at the corner. “ I’ll see you later, ” **she** **Ofglen** 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.