

3 Part three: Unemployed



A bout two o'clock, after lunch, the director came in to the discing room¹.

I have something to tell you, he said. He looked terrible; his hair was untidy, his eyes were pink and wobbling², as though he'd been drinking.

We all looked up, turned off our machines. There must have been eight or ten of us in the room.

I'm sorry, he said, but it's the law. I really am sorry.

For what? somebody said.

I have to let you go, he said. It's the law, I have to. I have to let you all go. He said this almost gently, as if we were wild animals, frogs he'd caught, in a jar, as if he were being humane.

We're being fired? I said. I stood up. But why?

Not fired, he said. Let go. You can't work here any more, it's the law. He ran his hands through his hair and I thought, he's gone crazy. The strain³ has been too much for him and he's blown his wiring⁴.

You can't just *do* that, said the woman who sat next to me. This sounded false, improbable, like something you would say on television.

It isn't me, he said. You don't understand. Please go, now. His voice was rising. I don't want any trouble. If there's trouble the books might be lost, things will get broken...

He looked over his shoulder. They're outside, he said, in my office. If you don't go now they'll come in themselves. They

gave me ten minutes. By now he sounded crazier than ever.

He's loopy⁵, someone said out loud; which we must all have thought.

But I could see out into the corridor, and there were two men standing there, in uniforms, with machine guns. This was too theatrical to be true, yet there they were: sudden apparitions, like Martians. There was a dreamlike quality to them; they were too vivid, too at odds with their surroundings.

Just leave the machines, he said while we were getting our things together, filing out. As if we could have taken them.

We stood in a cluster⁶, on the steps outside the library. We didn't know what to say to one another. Since none of us understood what had happened, there was nothing much we could say. We looked at one another's faces and saw dismay, and a certain shame, as if we'd been caught doing something we shouldn't.

It's outrageous, one woman said, but without belief. What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it?

1 (ici) *salle de composition éditoriale* • 2 *tremblotants* • 3 *stress* • 4 (ici) *système nerveux* • 5 *crazy* • 6 *in group*

The Handmaid's Tale,
Margaret Atwood, 1985



A. Read the text and pick out elements that show the director's state of mind.

B. Pick out the women's reactions and the comments that the narrator makes. How do the women feel?

C. What language and images are used to convey the surreal impression felt by the women?

D. Focus on the last sentence and use your previous answers to say how this extract accounts for the women's lack of rebellion.

E. Go further. Say how the two previous extracts build up to this one.