

## 2 Part two: That day



We'd all got up in the usual way and had breakfast, granola, I remember, and Luke had driven [our daughter] off to school, in the little outfit I'd bought her just a couple of weeks before, striped overalls and a blue T-shirt. What month was this? It must have been September. There was a School Pool<sup>1</sup> that was supposed to pick them up, but for some reason I'd wanted Luke to do it, I was getting worried even about the School Pool. No children walked to school any more, there had been too many disappearances.

When I got to the corner store, the usual woman wasn't there. Instead there was a man, a young man, he couldn't have been more than twenty.

She sick? I said as I handed him my card.

Who? he said, aggressively I thought.

The woman who's usually here, I said.

How would I know, he said. He was punching my number in, studying each number, punching with one finger. He obviously hadn't done it before. I drummed my fingers on the counter, impatient for a cigarette, wondering if anyone had ever told him something could be done about those pimples<sup>2</sup> on his neck. I remember quite clearly what he looked like: tall, slightly stooped<sup>3</sup>, dark hair cut short, brown eyes that seemed to focus two inches behind the bridge of my nose, and that acne. I suppose I remember him so clearly because of what he said next.

Sorry, he said. This number's not valid.

That's ridiculous, I said. It must be, I've got thousands in my account. I just got the statement two days ago. Try it again.

It's not valid, he repeated obstinately. See that red light? Means it's not valid.

You must have made a mistake, I said. Try it again.

He shrugged<sup>4</sup> and gave me a fed-up smile, but he did try the number again. This time I watched his fingers, on each number, and checked the numbers that came up in the window. It was my number all right, but there was the red light again.

See? he said again, still with that smile, as if he knew some private joke he wasn't going to tell me.

I'll phone them from the office, I said. The system had fouled up<sup>5</sup> before, but a few phone calls usually straightened it out. Still, I was angry, as if I'd been unjustly accused of something I didn't even know about. As if I'd made the mistake myself.

You do that, he said indifferently. I left the cigarettes on the counter, since I hadn't paid for them. I figured I could borrow some at work.

I did phone from the office, but all I got was a recording. The lines were overloaded, the recording said. Could I please phone back?

The lines stayed overloaded all morning, as far as I could tell. I phoned back several times, but no luck. Even that wasn't too unusual.

1 *transport scolaire* • 2 *boutons d'acné* • 3 *voûté* •  
4 *hausser les épaules* • 5 *mess up, break down*

*The Handmaid's Tale*,  
Margaret Atwood, 1985



**A.** Read the text. What happened to the narrator?

Why was that day important to her?

**B.** Identify the elements of conversation.

Is there anything that surprises you?

What effect does this have on the reader?

**C.** Pick out the clues showing that the situation is only going to get worse.