

LOVE AMONG THE FACTOIDS

by

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The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood's futuristic dystopia, is imbued with the author's trademark bemusement, unrelenting imagination, a perfunctory manner in detailing the nightmare (which weakens the Handmaid's lament), also a mulish manipulation and garbling of conservative manners and mores to invoke both fear and ridicule. The prospect of wide-spread sterility due to endemic pollution and scientific hubris is the tale's jeremiad, which Ms. Atwood introduces with numbing ease. Sperm is largely sterile and fertile wombs are dwindling. The dual-prospect of infertility and surrogacy are the novel's importunate givens.

The resort to surrogacy here has nothing to do with the paucity of adoptable babies due to the popularity of contraceptives and abortion, and the freedom of unprecedented comfort and affluence in upper-middle class America, resulting in the disinclination of many healthy women to bear 'undeserved' inconvenience — a measure of increasing not diminishing female freedom, as sanctioned by feminists themselves. That fertility may be a pending human catastrophe, ostensibly due to food additives, genetic engineering and pollution, not longstanding Western flab, sloth and inactivity that degrade more than sperm and eggs, begs the question. In general, 'third world' fertility remains high in the book and a problem for its fragile economies. Oddly, in The Handmaid's Tale, the rest of the world seems to be going about its business as usual. Only the United States suffers from the dual paroxysms of xenophobia and dysgenesis, plus an antic 'fundamentalist' craze that overwhelms the government and manhandles the entire

country. America, a land of historic contamination, smarm and despotism. A few dissident sects still stand in the way and constitute the paramount 'enemy' (Marxism is a non-player in the book), as if the lauders of say Jerry Falwell were locked in mortal combat with the devotees of Billy Graham. What feral, internecine strife the Lawrence Welk entourage must have contended with. Imagine sweetheart Earnest Angely with a Stinger Missile. It is interesting to note that Pat Roberson, the one fundamentalist who actually attempted to become President of the United States, 'didn't have a prayer' — a quote from William F. Buckley Jr., a preeminent American conservative.

Equally amazing, and often puzzling, is the fondness for spectacle that imbues the predilections of the stolid Gileadan rulers, Ms. Atwood's luckless potentates. Why, for instance, when the word 'sterile' is banned by government decree, do handmaids, the hush-hush remedy, wear a conspicuous bright blood-red, with an ornate catholic headpiece, which sensuously draws attention to themselves and the pervasiveness of sterility itself — and hence their society's predicament? Presumably, the leaders of the Gilead community are mere novices at Fascism — vide the flamboyant manner the security organs function, driving about in vans distinctly marked with a large winged eye painted on the side, providing a bravado target for rebel subversives — who indeed exist in the novel. Talk about swagger smug! The historic example of anonymity, invisibility and surprise that limn the state security apparatus from the Gestapo (the 'night callers') to the KGB and Stasi, world masters at pervasive control, has not impressed the Gileadans. Even Japanese tourists get to camera-frame the remains of capital deviants, hanging so pathetically on meat hooks, suggesting that the once entrepreneurial right, facing economic hardship, perhaps feels American blood is a sellout show for the affluent, Japanese tourist. Or that horror spectacles are in, and it's better not to hornswoggle the connoisseurs. Imagine a

secret KGB punishment cell, a primitive KGB cell in Gorky Park say, as well attended as the Bolshoi, and as colourful, and you have some ideas of Miss Atwood's love of dramatic theatre. So much for the 'grey', 'characterless, Fascist landscape. Colours and ornate screens abound — even the doctor's office, usually as stark as modern service dispensaries become, has boldly decorated facades on its dividers. The dour, financially-strapped, food-rationed fundamentalist Gilead leadership promotes a pervasive civic pageantry that would be the envy of any national theatre.

But the paradoxical nature of Gilead society is barely touched by the dramatic flourishes. What is truly astonishing is how much its long-suffering conservatives have assimilated left-liberal values! The trauma over not having a perfect baby, for instance. A community that once accepted God's will in the matter of endowment, now is seized with a dedicated abortionist's loathing for 'defective', 'unloved' offspring. A community that once interpreted the visiting of disease or deformity a divine intervention to be borne stoically, especially if aggravated by sexual licence, now places the onus on the children themselves, and punishes (ranks) them accordingly — the 'unbabies' — even resorting to toilet cleaner to terminate a hateful heir. The ardent right-to-lifer transformed into an ogre fetching toilet cleaner for foeticide! How diligently the Gilead folk have accepted the progressive terror of a tainted, impure world — once considered a devilishly deceptive of-the-flesh concoction anyway. Correction — a tainted, impure United States. The Japanese and Canadians, at least, still drink the water, apparently. Presumably the Free Trade Deal was abandoned in time.

The Gilead leaders are in fact relentlessly quirky. The universities, for instance, are closed — during wartime! A time when even Hitler and Stalin gave out numerous dispensations to keep their scientists busy — doing research and training recruits and cadres. Indeed, the spur that all

wars have given to knowledge generally is arrested in Gilead. Even writing, except at the highest echelons, is banned. One way of keeping stolid *fonctionnaires* as inefficient as possible — in wartime!

The sense of thrift and practicality that usually attends a fundamentalist is also strangely missing. The private gardens of wealthy and poor in both Europe and North America, grew many vegetables in wartime, but not in food-rationed Gilead. The gardens there just give out profane lusty smells of decaying flowers, as decadent as any languid Fellini suburb — and flowers there are galore! To compliment the obsession against lust, in a concentration-reminiscent environment, where our handmaid can imagine stripping before her guards, this slave to conception, at one remove from a Japanese comfort woman. It gets confusing. Especially when the guards themselves are forced to live celibate lives. Guards! The MP-style heavies doing the dirty work. Celibate ascetics? Huh? ‘They have no outlets except themselves, and that’s a Sacrilege.’ (Who’s guarding the guards we never learn.) Talk about running on empty. Or rather — screw the historic example of keeping the dogs of war happy. The heroic stoic stature Ms. Atwood imagines the fundamentalist capable of assuming is, in its way, nothing short of miraculous.

Indeed, her vision of the day-to-day workings of a Fascist regime is mainly preternatural. Fundamentalists, once very able entrepreneurs, can no longer grow even antibiotic-pumped cattle; indeed, Gilead has been visited with the ineptness of the classic Soviet economy (wine is apparently plentiful, though where it comes from — a war is raging in California — is unclear). Otherwise the queues are straight from a butcher-shop lineup at the nadir of the Brezhnev era. Unlike the Soviet lineup, where a church-quiet would be stupefying, no one makes jokes, whereas some of the finest Russian humour conspired to birth itself in such lineups. But in Gilead you can hear a pin drop. Human endurance

has reached Mother Teresa singularity.

The working of the Gilead security pass system is similarly astonishing, and the words Ms. Atwood uses to describe it often downright blazé. To imagine a security van being waved by many check points — no checking of credentials — when the example of pass systems that actually work formidably well (vide the endless GRU checks it visits on all its officers), is either ironic or insouciant; and since irony is out of place, the alert reader has little choice. To imagine the average security guard too timid to look on is simply obtuse. Any authoritarian system is rife with envy and suspicion. 'The Guardians would not want to take the risk of looking inside (the vans), searching, doubting their authority. Whatever they think.' Ms. Atwood frequently makes light of the elementary totalitarian dictum: Trust no one, and insure that no one must! Hitler's, Stalin's, Mao's, Pol Pot's guardians in fact realized their authority by 'looking on'; many took photographs. So whatever are they, the guardians in Gilead, thinking? Truly, Ms. Atwood is as tight-lipped on this subject as a Rumanian Securitate colonel, yet the guardians are a crucial part of her dystopia's control system, and we are asked to accept it as so. Her heroine would never have escaped but for this narrative fix. Indeed, passes and authorizations are themselves as suspect as individuals. Perhaps the 'celibate thug' has been under-researched. But then how can one deal with a sensibility that can write, without stint, 'Nothing changes instantaneously (so much for sudden aberrant rage or fusion energy): in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you know.' As you're being scalded to death you fancy yourself in a bubble bath, perhaps. A marinated writer may be so poached, but only a few of us went to creative writing class. Who, but such an alumni for instance, could use the word 'colony' in quite the derogatory way Ms. Atwood does. At one time 'colony' might rank as a Jewel in the Crown, even Americans were once proud of the Thirteen they had, all of which

fared well. But in Gilead, 'colony' refers to terminal concentration camps where victim-inmates clean up toxic disaster areas. It is a very sarcastic, ultraliberal use of 'colony' visited upon the conservative Gileadans. Resort to such tropism, for example, put Armando Valladares into a Cuban dungeon — a credible concentration camp — for several years. The Gilead colonies, the extension of their power and grandeur — Golgothas the lot. 'Colony' would surely be as verboten as 'sterile'. So much for sly slick preacher savvy and marketing. To imagine such bunglers seizing and running the United States gives one a measure of Ms. Atwood's contempt for American religious conservatives.

Time and time again, when she needs a narrative fix, Ms. Atwood simply abandons the complexity of the current situation, the intricacies then barnacled to her plot. When she has to get her freethinker Moira (disguised as one of the female authority figures, an 'Aunt') past a possible shakedown, the special handmaid guards, the Angels, don't, won't act. Why the Aunts would be so immune from suspicion (from subversive temptation) we never learn; they certainly are vicious and their future very bleak. Jewish guards in concentration camps never enjoyed such immunity. This trust of the Aunts becomes truly bizarre when one of them 'implies in everything she says', that 'Men are sex machines.' (Not the celibate guards of course.) 'You must learn to manipulate them for your own good. Lead them about by the nose; that is a metaphor. (Lest we forget.) It is nature's way. It's God's device. It's the way things are.' Sedition and misandry as handmaid instruction. Are some Aunts then simply waiting an opportunity — to seize power and end the pro forma manipulation? Who knows.

When the President is shot and Congress machine gunned — the miraculous ever obligingly attends Ms. Atwood's revolution — we are informed that our heroine is 'stunned' — indeed, we are most earnestly assured 'Everyone was.' 'It was hard to believe. The entire government,

gone like that. How did they get in, how did it happen?' Well, folks not a sausage. Not a scrabble token to let us in on one of the most daring, consummate takeovers in history. The drama is decidedly otherworldly here. 'That was then they (the revolutionaries) suspended the constitution' (after murdering the entire government; presumably the machine gunners asked first for a show of hands?). Eventually newspapers are censored — not right away mind you, ostensibly columnists got an editorial or two onto the streets with pictures of the slaughtered Congress. Some newspapers then close down, roadblocks appear, identity passes are instituted (for the first time?) — and still no explanation. Yet, yet: 'Everyone approved of that (all the new restrictions), since it was obvious you couldn't be too careful.' Everyone approved of that. Everyone — in the United States, one of the most stolidly restive, randy, constitution querulous, open, entitlement-hungry people on earth. And all this information from the heroine who doesn't watch television, doesn't read, doesn't visit a neighbour to ask questions (?) The morass is so thick, what can the observant reader do? Even Ms. Atwood seems to know where the best party is: 'This was too theatrical to be true, yet there they were (the new militant devouts), sudden apparitions, like Martians.' Well, we all know about Martians. 'Ours not to reason why,' says the vital Moira. Ms. Atwood has taken that injunction to heart. We never truly learn who the 'Martians' are. They are simply 'whoever'. There were simply 'studies done' or 'we have the stats from that time.' Who the 'we' are is never spelled out. We do learn that Cubans have an enviable daycare system, not of course one of the most penny pinching penal systems devised by man.

Ms. Atwood makes so little effort to really tell how it all works — and if she cannot what's the point? — it's just there, the way most paranoids, subclinical or not, view the world. The book is rife with invidious projections and demure solecisms that form a matrix of Ms.

Atwood's misandry and strenuous odium for conservative values. A few examples:

= Why are like sects so murderously belligerent to one another? (Baptists blowing up Mormons?) Not a single explanation.

= A handmaid's face can 'corrupt' strangers but not members of her household, and she muses about puritan austerity in a steamy warm bath. Do the lordly men take the cold showers?

= A doctor who does not consider a face a worthwhile medical symptom. Huh?

= A propaganda machine that tells its captive audience it's being attacked (threatened) in many places at once! A fine way to keep the anxiety in check.

= Pacifist Quakers as efficient subversives.

= Simply one too many comments like the following, (here concerning the 'resettlement' of the Children of Ham) which the author tosses off with embarrassing regularity: 'National Homeland One is North Dakota. Lord knows what they're supposed to do when they get there. Farm, is the theory.' But how could the closeted, ignorant handmaid make such an ominous comment and inference? And if she can, surely we're entitled to her source.

= Nuclear power plants (in the plural yet!) exploding 'along the San Andreas fault'. The one place even gung ho Nuclear Energy Commissioners would find obtuse.

= Medicine and pills, generally, all tarred with the toxic environmental brush.

= Giving birth to a 'shredder', a deformed baby — but another word that could only come from a progressive left-liberal lexicon.

= In the handmaid indoctrination school, desks that still have love inscriptions carved into them — in the community where sentiment is docked and duty enshrined. Sentimental love inscriptions — in Gilead

schools!

= Routine home birthing as a fundamental preference. Surely if the dangers are so many and threatening the sophisticated delivery room — separate from some utilitarian case van — would be somewhere in use.

= The 'true believers' described as arch 'perverts'.

= In a time of egregious scarcity toilet paper in abundance, enough to regularly plug toilets. And more precious still, custodial officers who can't find a way to lock away the toilet paper. 'They hadn't figured out a way of locking up the toilet paper.' Perhaps with the Communion grape juice? Indeed, toilet paper appears to be the only commodity that is plentiful in Gilead. Citizens of Marxist yoked regimes take note.

= Just having efficient fussy toilets, capable of being menacingly dismantled, in a prison-style setting yet. More 'bugs' that 'didn't get ironed out' — which we are repeatedly told, mostly are. Well, there was shortage of esthetically pleasing buckets perhaps.

= The relentless feminist bias, dressed up as exclusive civility: '(A man) will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman.' Well, to be far, Caitlyn Jenner wasn't around then, his Debutante Balls not the gracious seemly affairs they would become.

= Incessant ubiquitous searchlights and not a single alien plane or helicopter. Paranoia incorporated, presumably.

= Giggles and terror sometimes mixed willy nilly. I can't recall a single instance of someone giggling in Solzhenitsyn's Gulag or Valladares' Cuban captivity or Bruno Bettelheim's detailed Nazi nightmare — realistic settings of pervasive, vintage coercion.

= Then the sudden appearance of a jovial, blithe bunch of whole-earth professors researching the handmaid's journalistic chronicle, and making coy, anachronistic puns about 'tale'. Happy days are here again.

America the damned theocracy: false, vicious, witless, perishable.
So Endeth the Lesson.