

Margaret Atwood

Transcript of Witness Testimony 396A

5 You have asked me to tell you what it was like for me when I was growing up within Gilead. You say it will be helpful, and I do wish to be helpful. I imagine you expect nothing but horrors, but the reality is that many children were loved and cherished, in Gilead as elsewhere, and many adults were kind though fallible, in Gilead as elsewhere.

10 I hope you will remember, too, that we all have some nostalgia for whatever kindness we have known as children, however bizarre the conditions of that childhood may seem to others. I agree with you that Gilead ought to fade away – there is too much of wrong in it, too much that is false, and too much that is surely contrary to what God intended – but you must permit me some space to mourn the good that will be lost.

15 At our school, pink was for spring and summer, plum was for fall and winter, white was for special days: Sundays and celebrations. Arms covered, hair covered, skirts down to the knee before you were five and no more than two inches above the ankle after that, because the urges of men were terrible things and those urges needed to be curbed. The man eyes that were always roaming here and there like the eyes of tigers, those searchlight eyes, needed to be shielded from the alluring and indeed blinding power of us – of our shapely or skinny or fat legs, of our graceful or knobbly or sausage arms, of our peachy or blotchy skins, of our entwining curls of shining hair or our coarse unruly pelts or our straw-like wispy braids, it did not matter. Whatever our shapes and features, we were snares and enticements despite ourselves, we were the innocent and blameless causes that through our very nature could make men drunk with lust, so that they'd stagger and lurch and topple over the verge – The verge of what? we wondered. Was it like a cliff? –
20 and go plunging down in flames, like snowballs made of burning sulphur hurled by the angry hand of God. We were custodians of an invaluable treasure that existed, unseen, inside us; we were precious flowers that had to be kept safely inside glass houses, or else we would be ambushed and our petals would be torn off and our treasure would be stolen and we would be ripped apart and trampled by the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner, out there in the wide sharp-edged sin-ridden world.

30 That was the kind of thing runny-nosed Aunt Vidala would tell us at school while we were doing petit-point embroidery for handkerchiefs and footstools and framed pictures: flowers in a vase, fruit in a bowl were the favoured patterns. But Aunt Estée, the teacher we liked the best, would say Aunt Vidala was overdoing it and there was no point in frightening us out of our wits, since to instil such an aversion might have a negative influence on the happiness of our future married lives.
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“All men are not like that, girls,” she would say soothingly. “The better kind have superior characters. Some of them have decent self-restraint. And once you are married it will seem quite different to you, and not very fearsome at all.” Not that she would know anything about it, since the Aunts were not married; they were not allowed to be. That was why they could have writing and books. “We and your fathers and mothers will choose your husbands wisely for you when the time comes,” Aunt Estée would say. “So you don't need to be afraid. Just learn your lessons and trust your elders to do what is best, and everything will unfold as it should. I will pray for it.”
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45 But despite Aunt Estée's dimples and friendly smile, it was Aunt Vidala's version that prevailed. It turned up in my nightmares: the shattering of the glass house, then the rending and tearing and the trampling of

hooves, with pink and white and plum fragments of myself scattered over the ground. I dreaded the thought of growing older – older enough for a wedding. I had no faith in the wise choices of the Aunts: I feared that I would end up married to a goat on fire.

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The pink, the white, and the plum dresses were the rule for special girls like us. Ordinary girls from Econofamilies wore the same thing all the time –those ugly multicoloured stripes and grey cloaks, like the clothes of their mothers. They did not even learn petit-point embroidery or crochet work, just plain sewing and the making of paper flowers and other such chores. They were not pre-chosen to be married to the very best men – to the Sons of Jacob and the other Commanders or their sons – not like us; although they might get to be chosen once they were older if they were pretty enough.

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Nobody said that. You were not supposed to preen yourself on your good looks, it was not modest, or take any notice of the good looks of other people. Though we girls knew the truth: that it was better to be pretty than ugly. Even the Aunts paid more attention to the pretty ones. But if you were already pre-chosen, pretty didn't matter so much.

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I didn't have a squint like Huldah or a pinchy built-in frown like Shunammite, and I didn't have barely-there eyebrows like Becka, but I was unfinished. I had a dough face, like the cookies my favourite Martha, Zilla, made for me as a treat, with raisin eyes and pumpkin-seed teeth. But though I was not especially pretty, I was very, very chosen. Doubly chosen: not only pre-chosen to marry a Commander but chosen in the first place by Tabitha, who was my mother.

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That is what Tabitha used to tell me: "I went for a walk in the forest," she would say, "and then I came to an enchanted castle, and there were a lot of little girls locked inside, and none of them had any mothers, and they were under the spell of the wicked witches. I had a magic ring that unlocked the castle, but I could only rescue one little girl. So I looked at them all very carefully, and then, out of the whole crowd, I chose you!"

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"What happened to the others?" I would ask. "The other little girls?"

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"Different mothers rescued them," she would say.

"Did they have magic rings too?"

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"Of course, my darling. In order to be a mother, you need to have a magic ring."

"Where's the magic ring?" I would ask. "Where is it now?"

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"It's right here on my finger," she would say, indicating the third finger of her left hand. The heart finger, she said it was. "But my ring had only one wish in it, and I used that one up on you. So now it's an ordinary, everyday mother ring."

At this point I was allowed to try on the ring, which was gold, with three diamonds in it: a big one, and a smaller one on either side. It did look as if it might have been magic once.

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"Did you lift me up and carry me?" I would ask. "Out of the forest?" I knew the story off by heart, but I liked to hear it repeated.

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"No, my dearest, you were already too big for that. If I had carried you I would have coughed, and then the witches would have heard us." I could see this was true: she did cough quite a lot. "So I took you by the

hand, and we crept out of the castle so the witches wouldn't hear us. We both said Shh, shh" – here she would hold her finger up to her lips, and I would hold my finger up too and say Shh, shh delightedly – "and then we had to run very fast through the forest, to get away from the wicked witches, because one of them had seen us going out the door. We ran, and then we hid in a hollow tree. It was very dangerous!"

100 I did have a hazy memory of running through a forest with someone holding my hand. Had I hidden in a hollow tree? It seemed to me that I had hidden somewhere. So maybe it was true.

105 "And then what happened?" I would ask.

"And then I brought you to this beautiful house. Aren't you happy here? You are so cherished, by all of us! Aren't we both lucky that I chose you?"

110 I would be nestled close to her, with her arm around me and my head against her thin body, through which I could feel her bumpy ribs. My ear would be pressed to her chest, and I could hear her heart hammering away inside her – faster and faster, it seemed to me, as she waited for me to say something. I knew my answer had power: I could make her smile, or not.

115 What could I say but yes and yes? Yes, I was happy. Yes, I was lucky. Anyway it was true.

(2019)