

1859.

I am sitting on the purple velvet settee in the Governor's parlour, the Governor's wife's parlour; it has always been the Governor's wife's parlour although it is not always the same wife, as they change them around according to the politics.

5 She does not like being the Governor's wife, she would prefer the Governor to be the governor of something other than a prison. The Governor had good enough friends to get him made the Governor, but not for anything else.

10 So here she is, and she must make the most of her social position and accomplishments, and although an object of fear, like a spider, and of charity as well, I am also one of the accomplishments. I come into the room and curtsy and move about, mouth straight, head bent, and I pick up the cups or set them down, depending; and they stare without appearing to, out from under their bonnets.

15 The reason they want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess. Or that is what has been written down. When I first saw it I was surprised because they say Celebrated Singer and Celebrated Poetess and Celebrated Spiritualist and Celebrated Actress, but what is there to celebrate about murder? All the same, *Murderess* is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word—musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase. Sometimes at night I whisper it over to myself. *Murderess, Murderess*. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt across the floor.

20 *Murderer* is merely brutal. It's like a hammer, or a lump of metal. I would rather be a murderess than a murderer, if those are the only choices.

Sometimes when I am dusting the mirror with the grapes I look at myself in it, although I know it is vanity. In the afternoon light of the parlour my skin is a pale mauve, like a faded bruise, and my teeth are greenish. I think of all the things that have been written about me—  
25 that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome with a brilliant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above the average height, that I am well and  
30 decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?

35 It was my own lawyer, Mr. Kenneth MacKenzie, Esq., who told them I was next door to an idiot. I was angry with him over that, but he said it was by far my best chance and I should not appear to be too intelligent. He said he would plead my case to the utmost of his ability, because whatever the truth of the matter I was little more than a child at the time, and he supposed it came down to free will and whether or not one held with it. He was a kind  
40 gentleman although I could not make head nor tail of much of what he said, but it must have been good pleading. The newspapers wrote that he performed heroically against overwhelming odds. Though I don't know why they called it pleading, as he was not pleading but trying to make all of the witnesses appear immoral or malicious, or else mistaken.

I wonder if he ever believed a word I said.

45 When I have gone out of the room with the tray, the ladies look at the Governor's wife's scrapbook. Oh imagine, I feel quite faint, they say, and You let that woman walk around loose

in your house, you must have nerves of iron, my own would never stand it. Oh well one must get used to such things in our situation, we are virtually prisoners ourselves you know, although one must feel pity for these poor benighted creatures, and after all she was trained as a servant, and it's as well to keep them employed, she is a wonderful seamstress, quite deft and accomplished, she is a great help in that way especially with the girls' frocks, she has an eye for trimmings, and under happier circumstances she could have made an excellent milliner's assistant.

Although naturally she can be here only during the day, I would not have her in the house at night. You are aware that she has spent time in the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto, seven or eight years ago it was, and although she appears to be perfectly recovered you never know when they may get carried away again, sometimes she talks to herself and sings out loud in a most peculiar manner. One cannot take chances, the keepers conduct her back in the evenings and lock her up properly, otherwise I wouldn't be able to sleep a wink. Oh I don't blame you, there is only so far one can go in Christian charity, a leopard cannot change its spots and no one could say you have not done your duty and shown a proper feeling.

The Governor's wife's scrapbook is kept on the round table with the silk shawl covering it, branches like vines intertwined, with flowers and red fruit and blue birds, it is really one large tree and if you stare at it long enough the vines begin to twist as if a wind is blowing them.

The Governor's wife cuts these crimes out of the newspapers and pastes them in; she will even write away for old newspapers with crimes that were done before her time. It is her collection, she is a lady and they are all collecting things these days, and so she must collect something, and she does this instead of pulling up ferns or pressing flowers, and in any case she likes to horrify her acquaintances.

So I have read what they put in about me. She showed the scrapbook to me herself, I suppose she wanted to see what I would do; but I've learnt how to keep my face still, I made my eyes wide and flat, like an owl's in torchlight, and I said I had repented in bitter tears, and was now a changed person, and would she wish me to remove the tea things now; but I've looked in there since, many times, when I've been in the parlour by myself.

A lot of it is lies. They said in the newspaper that I was illiterate, but I could read some even then. I was taught early by my mother and I've learnt a lot more since being here, as they teach you on purpose. They want you to be able to read the Bible, and also tracts, as religion and thrashing are the only remedies for a depraved nature and our immortal souls must be considered. It is shocking how many crimes the Bible contains. The Governor's wife should cut them all out and paste them into her scrapbook.

Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, 1996 (shortened)