AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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THE HANDMAID'S TALE

CUT & THIRST

a short story

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“We could just push them out of windows,” says Leonie.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” says Chrissy. “Everyone would say it was Russians.”

“So much the better,” says Myrna. “It would deflect suspicion from us.”

“Once we murder more than three of them, somebody might connect the dots,” says Chrissy.

“Who knows about those dots anymore, besides us?” says Leonie. “It was a while ago. God, I feel old.”

“Don’t say ‘old,’ it’s ‘older,’” says Chrissy. “Fern knows. She’s memorized those dots. She owns those dots!”

“More like, those dots own her,” says Leonie. “They live in her head.”

“We are absolutely not telling Fern,” Myrna says. “She’d disapprove. She’d stop us.”

“She wouldn’t ever watch those early kung fu movies with us,” says Chrissy. “Remember *The One-Armed Swordsman*?”

“Erased from memory,” says Leonie. “When did we watch those?”

“Movie nights, at college,” says Myrna. “Spring break. Back when you had to go to actual theaters.”

“College,” sighs Chrissy. “It used to be so fun!”

“Nostalgia is your enemy,” says Leonie. “I’m having a fill-up. Myrna, shove over the gin.”

They’re sitting in Leonie’s backyard, drinking G and Ts. Or Leonie is drinking G and Ts. Chrissy has a white wine spritzer. Myrna, a diet cola because she can’t permit any brain fog during these gatherings, she’d let the others talk her into things, such as murdering eight men, or is it nine? Though despite the lack of alcohol she seems to have already committed to doing this, at least in principle.

“Are we going to murder them one-on-one, or all of us together, like the cauldron scene in *Macbeth*?” she asks.

“Say ‘the Scottish play,’” says Chrissy, who has semi-amateur theater far back in her CV. “It’s bad luck otherwise.”

“What cauldron scene?” Leonie asks.

“‘Eye of newt.’ ‘Double, double.’ All of that,” says Myrna, usually dependable on the subject of quotations. “‘Finger of birth-strangled babe’—now that’s nasty!”

“Right. I’ve got enough bad luck as it is,” says Leonie. “Pass the cheese plate? I’m too lazy to get up.” Too tired, Myrna glosses, chemo does that.

They’re eating olives, and thin crackers made out of pecans, with a new kind of cheese—bright orange, and really yummy—that Leonie sourced at Nancy’s Cheese Shop. Nancy is always reliable, in their opinion. If you say, “Not too bland, but not too smelly,” she knows what you mean. If only you could preselect your social acquaintances that way, thinks Myrna.

There’s a plunk, right overhead. “Fucking squirrels,” says Leonie. Her yard has an ancient apple tree overshadowing it from the next-door neighbor’s. Every once in a while, a small, green, hard, pockmarked apple plummets down—thrown on purpose by malevolent squirrels, Leonie claims—bouncing off the red sun umbrella Leonie has erected, even though there’s no sun. The umbrella is entirely an apple defense, she says. Myrna has asked why she doesn’t just saw off the apple branches encroaching on her airspace, as is her civic right, but Leonie said it’s a complicated issue, and although yes, legally she could do so, the tree is so old that nuking those branches might put paid to its entire complete life. And that would upset the neighbors, a fate greatly to be avoided, since they are vocal and self-righteous, and have a large barky dog.

“Or the whole rotten tree might break off and fall on you, putting paid to your own entire complete life,” Myrna said.

“That’s being taken care of anyway.” Leonie has been on the ebb for several years now. Myrna sometimes wonders, uncharitably, why Leonie doesn’t just get on with it: you can’t endlessly be dying, there’s a sell-by date; sooner or later you have to actually die. Not that Myrna wishes Leonie to die—a hundred times the opposite, and what would they all do without her?—but the constant allusions to her impending mortality are frazzling to Myrna’s nerves. After a while—in fact, quite soon—she runs out of commiseration and then changes the subject, and that seems callous.

“About the murder methods,” she says now. “If not windows, then what? Daffodil bulbs in the stew? They do resemble onions, when sliced. An honest mistake might actually be made, by someone not very into cooking.” Like all of us now, she silently adds. Cooking was young love, followed by kids if any, and then midlife, when cooking tapers off, despite the occasional flare-up for dinner parties. Takeout and ordering in get their foot in the door: the pasta maker and the fondue pot dwindle to distant memories. “The important thing is to be plausible.”

“We have to make it look like accidents,” says Leonie. “I’m having another G and T.”

“It has to look like accidents from the outside, but we want *them* to know!” says Myrna. Leonie really shouldn’t be drinking, or not so much. Doesn’t it interfere with her medication? Pointless to mention it: Leonie would just say, “What the hey,” or “That horse has left the barn,” or “Might as well go down singing!”

“How do you mean?” Chrissy asks. “Are we going to write them anonymous notes, or what?” She has that startled-rabbit look she gets when she’s puzzled: the big eyes, the half-opened rosebud mouth, drawn on these days with lip-liner, since the original has shrunk somewhat. Myrna knows Chrissy isn’t stupid—she taught at a university once, they all did, not that this is a foolproof litmus test for non-stupidity—but a lifetime of playing a blond has taken its toll: adorableness is such a temptation. Just blink the bunny eyes and simper, and roadblocks (such as speeding tickets) dissolve like mirages. A temptation not available to us darker types, Myrna reflects, not without a flash of resentment. It eases one’s path through the tangled woods of life to be adorable, though there is of course a downside: men think you’re a pushover. Chrissy has had a lot of fending off to attend to, though not so much lately, despite the girlish pastels and dingly bracelets she still wears. Lavender and aqua are her themes today.

Leonie, on the other hand, is flamboyant, as usual: orange patio pants, and a white top with huge red hibiscuses all over it, or should that be hibisci? Tall women can get away with that sort of thing, Myrna reflects, unlike us hobbits. She has noticed, not without muted alarm, that she herself has shrunk half an inch over the past few years, but her feet have grown an entire shoe size. What next, furry ears?

“Anonymous notes would be trite,” she says. “We need something more subtle. The goal is that the ones we haven’t murdered yet ought to be able to figure out what’s happening to them. Their crimes catching up to them, after all these years.” And before we all die. Which is the subtext here, she thinks. “We want them to feel the hoofbeats of doom approaching. They should be made to suffer from the terror of anticipation.”

“Hoofbeats of doom?” Chrissy looks even more startled.

“You know. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” says Myrna, a little testily. She doesn’t like her metaphors being queried. “In the Book of Revelation. The Bible,” she adds, just in case Chrissy doesn’t know what the Book of Revelation is, as many do not these days. People are always

misusing “apocalypse,” she is tempted to add. It doesn’t mean “catastrophe,” it means—

“Why aren’t there any horse*women* of the apocalypse?” Chrissy asks. She devoted her academic life to such matters. Women missing from various spheres of activity—why no women garbage collectors? No women coal miners? No women journeymen? Women aerialists, though, and balloonists, and pilots, such as Amelia Earhart. Her one published book was about airborne women: women who managed to resist the pull of gravity, like—some might say—Chrissy herself. She has never been fully grounded.

“Don’t ask me,” says Myrna. “A guy wrote it. But it’s got the Whore of Babylon, clothed in scarlet and riding on a beast with a lot of horns. That counts for something.”

“A whore. Typical,” says Chrissy, tossing her silvering ponytail.

“Well, yes, *they* have to know,” says Leonie, adding ice and a fresh slice of lime to her glass. “But not the authorities. The authorities have to be fooled.”

“Wouldn’t they complain to the authorities? Like, ‘Officer, someone’s targeting me?’” says Chrissy.

“They’re such weenies, so one of them at least is bound to do that. They’ll probably suspect us, or the less-thick ones will. They know we’re best friends with Fern,” says Leonie. “But they won’t have any evidence, not if we do it right, so if they name us, three harmless old—three older ladies, with PhDs, they’ll sound deranged.”

“And they’ll assume it couldn’t possibly be Fern. She can’t even walk across the room anymore,” says Myrna. Silently she’s calculating: Could a person commit a murder even though nonambulatory? A blowgun? Whack them with a crutch? Insecticide in the tea? No, not the last: too obvious.

“She has to be helped in and out of bed. Thanks to them,” says Leonie.

“She was fine before it happened,” says Chrissy.

And for many years afterwards, thinks Myrna, as far as Fern’s physical condition went. It’s just recently that there’s been a sharp decline. Myrna has her doubts about the proposed cause and effect—immune-system diseases like MS involve genetic factors, she believes—but stress can indeed play a part, so she never questions the group belief: these eight, or is it nine, men put Fern in a wheelchair—a wheelchair rolling downhill to the morgue—as surely as if they’d beaten her up. “A slow assassination,” Leonie calls it.

“Of course, even if they guessed it was us and went to the police, they wouldn’t be believed.” Chrissy watches a lot of streaming-service crime shows, the British ones as a rule. In these shows, nobody who says such fraught, hysterical things to the authorities is ever believed, because if they were—says Myrna, who watches these shows herself, when she has time—there wouldn’t be a plot.

“They can’t claim they’re being targeted without saying what they’re being targeted *for*,” says Leonie. “Without fessing up to what they did.”

“And that would sound really silly to a policeman,” says Chrissy. “They’d say, ‘Nobody gets murdered for *that*.’”

“‘But he who steals my purse steals trash,’” says Myrna.

“Oh no!” says Chrissy. “Someone stole your purse?”

“It’s a quote,” says Myrna.

“I remember that one,” says Leonie. “I’ve still got half a brain left. *Othello*, right? ‘He that filches from me my good name . . .’”

“That’s what they did,” says Chrissy. “To Fern. They filched her good name.”

“Precisely,” says Leonie. “Now let’s quit dicking around. Which of them are we going to murder first, and how are we going to do it?”

“No wonder people were afraid of old women, back in the witch-barbecue days,” says Myrna. “They’ve spent a lifetime festering.”

“Older,” says Chrissy. “But we aren’t festering on our own behalf, we’re festering on Fern’s. We should have acted on this years ago.”

“Revenge is a dish best eaten cold,” says Myrna.

“Fern would say it’s a dish best not eaten at all,” says Chrissy, a little sadly. No matter how virtuous she is, she will never be as virtuous as Fern.

“I’m kicking you out now,” says Leonie. “Time for my pills.” She levers her tall body out of her garden chair and leads the way, somewhat unsteadily, to the back gate. Those red platform shoes are a broken leg waiting to happen, thinks Myrna. “Same time on Thursday?”

“Yes, but I think it should be my house this time,” says Chrissy.

“You hosted last week,” says Myrna.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” says Chrissy. What she means is that Myrna’s place is always a mess, and you never know which of her kids or grandkids might be in residence and clamoring for attention, or screaming with joy or anger and running around naked in the backyard. Not the kids any longer, thank heavens. Just the grandkids.

“I’ll bring the cheese, then,” says Myrna.

“Sleep on it, come with ideas,” says Leonie as she ushers them out. “Chrissy, you’ve got the list? Of all their names?”

“I’ll find it,” says Chrissy. “Anyway, Fern has it. She has all that stuff in a file.”

“Where she festers over it,” says Myrna. “It’s eating her up, that’s obvious. Even though she says it’s all in the past and she’s moved on.”

“Which is so untrue,” says Chrissy. “There is no past. Or at least, not until you deal with stuff.” Last year Chrissy went to a mindfulness coach and came away with a number of tips about how to clear ancient traumas. Myrna has tried a few of these tips, without success. Anyway, she doesn’t feel her own ancient traumas amount to much, so why put in any time on them? As soon as she sits down and closes her eyes and tries to meditate, a bunch of other things she ought to be doing pops into her head, such as the laundry, or an article she’s writing for *Etymology Today*—once a paper magazine, now online—on the diminishing effects of the suffix *-ling*. As in fingerling potatoes, or princeling, or underling. Or poetling: you might say that. A few of the men they intend to murder are poetlings. Or were. Myrna knows about poetlings, having once been one herself.

“We absolutely can’t ask Fern for that list,” says Leonie. “She’d know we’re up to something. She’d say, ‘Why do you need it?’”

“She’d guess. She’d say we’re being petty,” says Chrissy. “She’s such a saint.”

“Or if not petty, intensely criminal,” says Myrna.

“She’d say petty is worse,” says Chrissy.

On Wednesdays they take turns visiting Fern, and today is Myrna’s turn. She walks south, along a street of older houses, three-story, redbrick, some with Roman-arched porches, some with turrets. Gracious living once, then downhill through the middle of the twentieth century into rooming houses, student flats, cult dormitories—three cults on this street alone, including the Moonies and the Scientologists and the Hare Krishnas—and then up the social ladder again as the cults feuded and dispersed and richer people converted the rooming houses back into single-family dwellings, and installed heated driveways so they wouldn’t have to shovel any snow, and ripped the Victorian guts out of the stone-and-brick shells, all except for the

beautiful curved-wood banisters because you can't get anything like that today, and gracious living set in once more.

Though not in Myrna's house: she and Cal moved into this district when it was still the cults and the rooming houses, continuing their slapdash and book-bestrewn and disorganized and grubby lifestyle as gentrification jackhammered and stone-sawed its way all around them. How long will they hold out before succumbing to some lawyer newly rich on AI stock trading who makes them an offer that's worth triple the actual value of their house?

It's the tag end of summer. In the front yards of the gracious-living houses, the slugs and earwigs have been busy among the hostas, preparing a surprise display of lacework for the inhabitants returning from their Muskoka summer mansions, or Europe, or wherever they've been disporting themselves. Already a few yellowed leaves are falling onto the sidewalks, precursors of the inundation of worn-out foliage that is to come. "My way of life is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf," Myrna quotes to herself.

Waiting at the Bloor and Spadina crosswalk for the light to change, she's remembering a student production of *Macbeth* in which the tyrant's head had been played by a cabbage wrapped up in a tea towel. Hadn't Chrissy been in that one? Once a revenge got wound up and let loose, it had to be seen through to the end. Revenges could be inherited, they could be passed along, and this revenge had been passed along from Fern to the three of them. Not that Fern had done this deliberately, more as a result of not acting on the thing herself. The thing itself had been an ambush, a mobbing, a murder of crows. The attackers, the eight, or was it nine, male poetlings and assorted wordsmiths, had been gleeful and sadistic; the target—Fern—had been shell-shocked, initially disbelieving, then tearfully pitiful. "What have I done to deserve this?" she'd wail.

What Fern had done was so minor—you would think—as to inspire incredulous laughter in anyone who heard the story. Fern was a successful novelist and short-story writer—successful enough to be making quite a good living at it, unlike the poetlings and wordsmiths, and unlike, also, Leonie, Chrissy, and Myrna. All three of them had dabbled in the writerly world in their student youth—attending readings where the guest authors would routinely get lost in their own words of genius and drone on way past the natural bathroom break, or acting as coffee-fetching, slush-pile-reading

gofers at small presses, or proofreading for minute literary publications—all in the hopes that their own attempts at what is now called “creative writing” (ludicrously, in Myrna’s opinion, because what could be less creative than most of this word sludge?) might find a larger audience than one another. After the charm of the life of literary exploitation had worn off, however, they’d been lured away by the gilded bait of a regular paycheck, then sucked down the plughole into the once-upon-a-time safe and beflowered spaces of academe, though they’d kept a toe or two in the literary world, since they’d known and occasionally slept with a number of the players.

Inside the ivory tower, they’d basked, they’d flourished, at least at the beginning. Despite the resentments of some of their male confreres, they’d scarcely believed their luck. But now, thinks Myrna, that once-bucolic space is a battleground haunted by the walking dead, their erstwhile colleagues mind-controlled by tier upon tier of self-serving administrators out to gut their programs and replace them with young, underpaid serfs. Thank god the three of them had hit retirement age just in time! Who’d want to teach at a university these days? Didn’t the students rat the professors out at the slightest verbal misstep? Weren’t the beleaguered profs routinely mobbed on social media—as Chrissy had been just before she left for daring to teach *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, that disgusting, incestuous Jacobean bloodbath with such a demeaning word in the title? How could she have been so tone-deaf? So anti-woman? Not a good look!

“But I chose it as an example of misogyny,” Chrissy had wailed at the time. “You aren’t *supposed* to like it!”

“What did they want you to teach instead?” Myrna had asked.

“I suggested *Pygmalion*, by George Bernard Shaw. The one that got turned into a musical. *My Fair Lady*. Then they’d have some sort of movie to watch. They like that.”

“Isn’t that an example of misogyny, too?” Myrna asked.

“Oh yes! And classism! But they didn’t like that one, either! They wanted plays with everyone behaving perfectly all the time!”

“How French Revolution of them,” said Leonie, whose academic specialty had been the psychology of revolutions. “The Festival of the Supreme Being. Bucket of lizards! We know how that turned out!”

Myrna sighed. “It’s an old debate. Should art be good art, or art that’s good for you? Once the question gets raised, next thing you know they’re banning books in libraries.”

“Exactly,” said Leonie. “And once that starts, pretty soon you’re in the tumbrel on the way to the Place de la Révolution, and bingo, off with your head.”

“People can be so mean,” said Chrissy.

“You’ve noticed,” said Leonie. She raised her glass. “Here’s to our narrow escape. Fuck academia.”

“It was great while it lasted,” said Myrna.

“Sure, if you could get in,” said Chrissy. “What with being a girl, and so on and so forth.”

“Which became a protective charm for a while,” said Leonie. “But not anymore.”

Fern hadn’t done anything that might have attracted a mass stoning—no damningly incorrect word choices. Anyway, her takedown had preceded the advent of social media: she’d been the target of a print-era cabal, not an online mob. Her sin was that she’d edited an anthology of short stories. Innocent enough in itself, and from their present vantage point, thoroughly out of date—did anyone edit anthologies anymore? But back then, anthologies had counted for something, and it had conferred prestige and honor to be included in one. Fern, being Fern, hadn’t been slapdash about her selections. She’d agonized, she’d consulted, she’d weighed pros and cons, but in the end she’d committed the near-fatal mistake of not including any work by Humphrey Vacher. “Some of his longer stories are okay,” she’d told Myrna and Leonie and Chrissy, “but there isn’t anything short enough and good enough, and if I put in one of his longer ones, I’d have to leave out at least three of the younger kids.”

“Oh well. It’s not as if he’s a major talent,” said Leonie.

“He thinks he is,” said Myrna.

“I knew his first wife,” said Chrissy, “and also his second one, though not the third. I think she’s a small-animal veterinarian. He can be very . . . begrudging. At least according to them. The first two, I mean. One of them went further, and said ‘vindictive.’”

Humphrey—or The Humph, as his acolytes called him—had a notoriously short fuse, a brick-thick shoulder chip, and a long memory for slights, real or imagined. He took it as an unforgivable and deeply wounding insult that he’d been left out of Fern’s anthology, which was called, perhaps not most felicitously, *Metamorphic*. It was a geological reference, Fern had said. Her husband, Gervais—a geologist, now recently

and very unfortunately dead—had proposed it, and it was kind of brilliant because it suggested *metaphor* as well as *metamorphosis*, and didn't they think that was perfect? The publishers had wanted to call it *Gleanings*, she'd added, which was truly awful—so 1930s—and she'd been at her wit's end until Gervais had come to the rescue.

Fern had adored Gervais, and vice versa, so Myrna had kept it buttoned. She hadn't said, just for instance, that metamorphic rock was deformed rock, and some wag was bound to explore the possibilities of that. Let alone rock itself: so hard, so impermeable, so unliving, so clunky. Someone's prose style was bound to get joined at the hip with those scathing adjectives, and the person most likely to make such connections was Humphrey Vacher.

Myrna—though not Fern, who had basked gently, all unsuspecting, in the warmth of the early reviews—had kept a nervous eye on The Humph. Nothing at first: he was taking his time; he was refining his stratagems. He had a circle of younger men who were beholden to him—he'd married money and used it to buy a couple of small literary magazines, hardly a huge expenditure, and one small press—and had arranged for the fictions and reviews of his favored lads to be published by his outlets. So they owed him.

Anyway, from what Leonie had heard via the grapevine, the boys had been far from reluctant to join in the group destruction of Fern: Why should she be hogging the spotlight and sucking up all the air? Why should her books be selling so well, whereas theirs were not? Because Fern wrote cheap and careless romantic trash, was their shared view, and the reading public was mostly sloppy-minded middle-aged women and easily duped teenage girls. No wonder that rigorous literary quality, as represented by Humphrey Vacher, and to a lesser extent by his circle of admirers, was so undervalued and overlooked in this deplorable, bourgeois, hypocritical backwater of an excuse for a country. (Humphrey had come from England. Where else? Who on this side of the Atlantic would have had parents pretentious enough to name a defenseless baby Humphrey? His Englishness was thought by him to confer a superpower in matters literary, a view once shared by many others; though it surely is shared no longer, Myrna reflects with satisfaction.)

The Humph's plotting soon became evident. Over the span of a year, he and his cabal of eight others, or was it nine, had published a total of thirty-

six articles, two or three a month—in various magazines and also in three nationally read newspapers—denouncing Fern as an encapsulation of everything that was wrong with fiction writing today. Her historical novels were vapid, their style a decayed and florid baroque, their adjectives excessive, their emotions—oh unkind cut!—were "girly."

"You couldn't get away with 'girly' today," Chrissy had said when they were all discussing this barrage of verbiage.

"You could then," said Leonie. "I suppose they were attempting to display themselves as, you know, manly or something."

"That's what I mean," said Chrissy. "It wouldn't fly. Young people would make jokes, or worse."

"Oh, much worse," said Leonie.

Poor Fern, thinks Myrna, proceeding along Bloor toward Wiener's Home Hardware. No sooner had she more or less recovered from one Humph-instigated salvo of verbal offal than along would come another, and all of this disguised as thoughtful literary criticism. People actually took it seriously. Invitations to literary events dried up for Fern, or she believed they had. Other writers avoided her or made evasive remarks when they met. She thought they were laughing at her behind her back, because it was a big scandal, of course it was, and everyone relishes one of those, and some of the things Humphrey said were quite witty. She lost confidence in herself and her writing; she developed a fear of publishing. Her editors told her to blow it off, her readers weren't even aware of these attacks except for maybe the ones in the newspapers, and sales hadn't gone down, or not much. But Fern wasn't a person who could hit back—that would be exactly what they'd want, she said; it would draw attention, they'd love it—or pretend it wasn't happening.

For a couple of years, back then, she claimed she was afraid of going out of the house, because people were looking at her strangely. Gervais had been so angry! He wanted to punch a couple of those guys in the face, being from Alberta and also a geologist. Fern told him that she appreciated the sentiment, but that wasn't how it worked. "Then how *does* it fucking work?" Gervais had asked. To which there was no answer.

"We should have done something back then," Chrissy is in the habit of saying. "We were cowardly."

"Or maybe just lazy," Leonie replies. "We couldn't think of a workable plan, but we didn't try very hard. We said we'd just make it worse."

“Gervais kept saying he would handle it,” Myrna adds, “except then he didn’t.”

“Because Fern restrained him,” Chrissy says. “She was afraid of what he might do.”

“If unleashed,” says Leonie. “Gervais on the rampage! Pistols at dawn! Fern didn’t want blood on the floor.”

Unlike Leonie, Myrna thinks. She’d enjoy the gladiatorial spectacle. And possibly Chrissy: underneath that fastidious act of hers—“Ew, a dead slug”—inside that warm and sensitive pink heart, there’s a cold, hard little peach pit.

Myrna pops into Wiener’s to buy some white spray paint—her frazzling wicker laundry basket need not be discarded, it can be refreshed—and turns south toward Fern’s house, a handsome Richardsonian redbrick three-story from the early twentieth century. Fern could afford to go more upmarket, but she doesn’t want to move because that would mean moving away from Gervais, from the wonderful life they’d shared. She’s had to make alterations, however, because of the wheelchair. Although she’s had one of those stairway chairlift elevators installed and she can shift into it with the aid of Mrs. Carreira, the regular home help, or the other one who comes on weekends, she’s talking about having her bed moved down to Gervais’s old study. Getting upstairs is becoming too much of an effort.

Fern is in her plant-filled living room, wearing a cheerful cotton dress with a print of meadow flowers. Her pretty face is thinner, her skin almost translucent. Still, she smiles happily at Myrna and says how good it is to see her. Mrs. Carreira brings them in some tea and shortbread cookies, then vanishes back into the kitchen.

“I’ve got news,” Fern says. She’s just sent off the manuscript of her new novel—now that it’s done and she’s no longer fretting about not being able to finish, she can tell about it.

“Congratulations! So it hasn’t stopped you!” Myrna says, trying not to look at Fern’s no longer agile hands. How had she typed?

“I used voice to text,” says Fern, mind-reading. “I couldn’t have done a whole novel otherwise.” It’s called *Slander*, she tells Myrna, and it features the unmarried Lady Flora Hastings of the court of Queen Victoria, who was falsely and disgracefully rumored to be pregnant, but in fact had terminal

liver cancer. “I can only imagine what she must have gone through,” Fern adds.

I bet you can, thinks Myrna. “Are you worried about . . .” She pauses. She shouldn’t have started that sentence.

“About what?”

“You know. Them,” says Myrna. “The boys. Not that they’re exactly boys any longer.”

Fern laughs a little. “Oh yes. Them. The Old Boys. With the last two novels I didn’t hear much from them. A couple of lukewarm attempts, but nothing like their big campaign. A couple of them—four, actually—have apologized. They said they realize that what they did must have caused me pain. They said The Humph put them up to it.”

“They could’ve said no. Which ones apologized? Just curious,” says Myrna.

“Jason. One of the Stephens. William. Deepak.”

Myrna had been surprised by Deepak at the time—she’d thought he was more sensible—but in moments of turmoil and group action, people get carried away. “Apologized in private, I suppose,” she says.

“Yes,” says Fern, smiling wanly. “Naturally.”

Not good enough, thinks Myrna. Still, it might prevent them from getting murdered. Though some form of penalty is surely still called for.

The three of them meet again on Thursday, in Chrissy’s backyard this time. Chrissy has added another wind chime—this one, purchased at the Wychwood Barns Farmers’ Market, is made out of antique silver forks and knives—and another birdbath in the shape of a giant snail. She cannot resist such grace notes. Myrna is invited to check out the new hydrangea, a sort of raspberry color, and the acidanthera, which are at the end of their bloom though still very attractive, and the pink rose of Sharon. Chrissy is good with plants: she claims you have to talk to them, though she has never divulged what you’re supposed to say. Probably not what Myrna says when yet another of her attempts at garden beautification shrivels up and dies. Chrissy would not say, “Bugger this,” under any circumstances: she considers it antigay. Myrna has explained that the term derives from an Old French word meaning “heretic,” but this has failed to impress Chrissy, who points out that nobody except Myrna would actually know that, and anyway that is not what the word means now.

They sit under Chrissy’s pale-green sun umbrella, around Chrissy’s teakwood-and-glass patio table. Myrna has brought the cheese, which she got at Nancy’s: a yak cheese, quite rare and thus a little on the expensive side, said Nancy, yaks not being plentiful or even good-natured. After they’ve briefly discussed the cheese—“It has depth,” Chrissy offered—they consider their options.

“The worst first, or start at the bottom and work up?” says Leonie.

“I vote the latter,” says Myrna. “And by the way, four of them have apologized to Fern.”

“Privately, I suppose,” says Leonie.

“Which four?” says Chrissy, who is in charge of the list.

“Jason, William, Deepak, and one of the Stephens.”

Chrissy puts Xs beside three of the names with a pale-pink highlighter. “Which of the Stephens?” she asks.

“I couldn’t ask without arousing suspicion,” says Myrna, who in actual fact simply forgot.

“We can make an educated guess,” says Leonie. “It’s the Stephen with the hyphenated last name. The one who used his middle name, I think it began with Q, is a total dick.”

“I thought it was the other way around,” says Chrissy.

Things are getting a little surreal. Are three respectable elderly women really sitting in a pastel garden planning the murders of nine has-been writers? Chrissy, having consulted the list, has said there are nine.

“Let’s concentrate on the nonapologizers first,” says Leonie.

“Okay, so that leaves us with five,” says Chrissy.

They sit companionably, eating cubes of yak cheese and discussing assassination procedures. They reject electrocution with a radio in the bathtub (too difficult to stage, for how would they get into the dicky Stephen’s bathroom?) and hit-and-run with Leonie’s car (too many potential witnesses). Guns are out: they lack shooting experience, plus there are the incipient eye problems—a cataract here, an astigmatism there; they might blow out a streetlight or hit an innocent bystander. Mixing some high-powered sleeping pills into The Humph’s allegedly copious whiskey supply would surely involve a break-in, way too athletic. Toxic mushrooms—how would they insinuate such mushrooms into the victim’s kitchen? Their respect for murderers is increasing: not so easy, this murdering business.

“I could run them through,” says Chrissy finally.

“What?” says Myrna. “I mean, with what?” She visualizes a fireplace poker.

“With my fencing foil. From that play I was in. I still have it, I sort of forgot to return it afterwards.” This would not be the first or last thing Chrissy has failed to return. She still has Myrna’s *Anglo-Saxon Weather Kennings*, and Leonie’s soufflé dish.

“You did fencing?” Leonie asks. “You?” Chrissy and potentially lethal activities don’t fit.

“When I was acting. We were doing the Scottish play, at college. I was Young Siward.”

“Isn’t that a boy?” asks Leonie.

Chrissy shoots her a reproachful look. “Nobody would question that today. Gender is—”

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” says Leonie. “Into the stocks with me! Pelt me with rotten vegetables!”

“She’s just trying to save us from ourselves,” says Myrna.

“That horse has left the barn,” Leonie says, upending her G and T.

“Anyway, in all the plaid you couldn’t tell I was a girl,” says Chrissy. “I really enjoyed that fight! The cut and thirst!”

“Cut and thirst?” says Myrna.

“I like that,” says Leonie. “First you murder someone and then you need a drink. I’m having another, join me?”

“Just half,” says Chrissy. “I meant cut and thrust. Of course.”

“Maybe we should start at the top rather than the bottom. Run The Humph through first,” says Leonie. “He’s always been one for the cut and thrust, but with only him doing it.”

“If we work our way down, the others would be an anticlimax,” says Chrissy. She hesitates. “Um, I don’t think we should actually kill them. It seems a little severe.”

“Chicken,” says Leonie, laughing. “Kill their dogs?”

“No! You can’t!” Chrissy shrieks. She has tender views about animals.

“Joking,” says Leonie.

They decide to begin with the nonapologetic Stephen, the one with the Q. The dick. But what shall be the method? Itching powder in the gym workout shorts is rejected—how would they get into the men’s locker room and then the locker itself? Letting the air out of car tires is judged too juvenile, and also not severe enough. Mailing boxes of dog poo—no, too

icky, says Chrissy, and dog poo is not that easy to find now that so many people are on board with poop ’n’ scoop.

“There’s the Ex-Lax Revenge,” says Leonie. “On a cake. I know it’s been done, but . . .”

“Brownies would be better,” says Myrna. “But we can’t just leave them on his doorstep. No one eats anonymous food.”

“He always had a thing for me,” says Chrissy. “That Stephen. Back when we were both working for the poetry magazine. *Cyclone*? *Tornado*?”

“I remember it,” says Myrna. “We used to call it *Muggy Breeze*.”

“He was one of those guys who thought you had an obligation to sleep with them because you were on the pill. They were so annoying,” says Chrissy, as if speaking of clothes moths.

“And did you?” asks Leonie, interested.

“No! He smelled funny,” says Chrissy.

“Fatal,” says Myrna. “So how are you going to do it?”

“I’ll just turn up at his place,” says Chrissy. “Offer sex. Say I’ve relented after all these years. Tell him the brownies have hash in them, which would be a good thing anyway—let’s do that! He’ll absolutely let me in.”

“Do you intend to actually, you know, go through with it?” asks Leonie. “I mean the sex part.”

“Heavens no! If he was stinky then, he’ll be twice that now! I’ll say hash brownies first, wait till he eats a couple, and then say I’m not feeling well and scoot out of there. Easy-peasy!”

Myrna has her doubts about this plan. Chrissy is still attractive, of course, though not quite in that way, and like most handsy lechers, Stephen with a Q must prefer the young and the juicy. But you never know, he might be getting desperate.

Quite a few things could go wrong with this scenario. Different kinds of things. But Chrissy seems determined, and it’s worth a try.

They divide up the tasks—Leonie will source the hash or equivalent, Myrna will make the brownies, Chrissy will get her hair done. She will also figure out where Stephen with a Q lives. She knew that once—he used to dwell on other people’s couches when he was a poetling—but much has changed since then. Rumor has it he took a business degree and became a consultant, but maybe that was the other Stephen.

Myrna and Leonie walk away from Chrissy's house, a small 1880s redbrick with a miniature fairy-tale turret, which Chrissy and her third husband, or was it her fourth, had bought from one of the disintegrating cults and brought up to speed. Myrna doesn't want to ask Leonie how she's doing healthwise, because she's afraid of the answer. However, she needs to show concern—a concern she really does feel—so instead she asks about Leonie's husband, Alan, who has severe dementia and is in a care home.

"The same," says Leonie. "Actually, worse. He thinks I'm someone else."

"Who, exactly?"

"Neither of us knows," says Leonie. "He asks me what I've done with Leonie. I sometimes wonder that myself." She bends, gives Myrna a hug. "Hi to Cal from me," she says. "Be grateful you've still got him."

When telling the other two about her adventure—her catastrophe—no, not a catastrophe, it wasn't that; about her . . . what would you call it?—Chrissy attempts to be as accurate as possible. Accuracy isn't always easy when you've behaved in a way that might not be up to your usual standards of efficiency, she reflects; the temptation is to gloss over or to replay things the way you wish they had gone rather than how they actually had. But she tries to keep the events in order.

She leaves things out, naturally. She doesn't tell about how she almost lost her nerve and decided not to go through with it, despite all their planning. She wasn't worried about giving the unapologetic Stephen a bad case of the runs: that was the least he deserved. But what if she offered herself as a sex object and he said something like, "Sex with you? Don't be ridiculous, you crazy old bat, I'd rather fuck a turnip?" What then?

Finding Stephen Q's address hadn't been that hard, because the internet leaks like a sieve, and she knew people who knew people who still kept in touch with him on Facebook, and when she'd said she had a little gift for him she got the address from them, because who could be against a little gift?

He lived in one of the new but far-from-luxury condos in Queen West, in an edgy district still quite down-market—festooned with graffiti, overstocked with tattoo parlors and cheap pizza outlets—just the kind of place an aging dick like him would live, she'd decided: he'd always wanted to be cooler than he was. With Myrna's Ex-Lax brownies beside her on the

seat—in a disposable aluminum tin so there wouldn't be any questions about returning a permanent kitchen pan—she drove down through the endless construction that has spread all over Toronto, transforming the city from week to week. She hardly recognized anything anymore. She felt like an exile, stuck in a foreign country with no way to get back to a place where she'd been comfortable. You blinked and turned your head, and former cafés, restaurants, and theaters had vanished just like that—swept away, almost as if there'd been a war. And people were slowly dying, like Leonie, like Fern, or they were already dead, like her second husband. Having started out so gallantly—them, her, everyone her age—and in such high spirits, they were being picked off one by one . . .

You're merely getting less young, she lectured herself. Why shouldn't things change? Why shouldn't the cycle of life fulfill itself, as with annuals such as petunias? Here in June, gone in October. If they didn't change at all, that would be creepy.

"Falling in love again, never wanted to," she sang, to cheer herself up. That was from *The Blue Angel*, with Marlene Dietrich, a film she'd screened as part of a course called Seductresses. Theda Bara as Cleopatra—all she had for that was stills, the film itself having gone up in flames—and Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*, among others. It was a lot easier to show movies to her students than to insist they read books, though the movies then were mostly based on books. Books written by men: they did love their seductresses. "Whatever Lola wants," she warbled to herself. If only it was that easy. What had she wanted, what had she got? It was hard to remember.

She'd taken care with her seductress outfit. She'd got her hair trimmed and freshly silvered; she had her Spanx body shaper on under her flirty pink sundress, despite the heat, and open-toed sandals, because her toes were one of her good features; she'd had a mani-pedi for the occasion. She hadn't overdone it, though. No miniskirt, nothing like that. She knew where to draw the line. Or she thought she knew.

She parked her car, found the condo building, and went in, brownie pan in hand. First obstacle: how to get from the small entryway through the locked plate glass door and into the main foyer, where the elevators probably were. There was no concierge, so she couldn't simply jam her nose against the glass, make a big-eyed orphan face, and act appealing. She'd have to call the bad Stephen on the intercom. But that would nullify

the element of surprise, and he might not remember who she is, or was. On the other hand, he might remember and then, embarrassed by his juvenile groping and grabbing behavior, not let her in.

After some thought, she pushed all the buttons next to all the names on the call box. When the first voice answered, a woman, Chrissy said, "Delivery," in a bright voice.

"But I didn't order anything," said the voice, grumpily.

"It's a gift," she warbled. It was the kind of neighborhood where you couldn't leave packages in the entranceway, they'd be 80 percent certain to be stolen. After a moment the door-lock buzzer sounded and she was in. Behind her there was a chorus of other voices—*Hello? Who is it? Hello?* But they were too late: she was at the elevator.

The gropey Stephen lived on the seventh floor; she'd got the apartment number from the call box. She found the door, adjusted her smile, knocked, then saw that there was a doorbell and rang as well. Were there footsteps? Was he home? It was a Sunday, so chances were . . .

The door opened a crack. It was on a chain. "Who is it?" said a voice.

"Stephen?" she trilled. "It's me! Chrissy! From *Cyclone*, remember?" Or was it *Tornado*?

"Chrissy?" A pause. "Oh yes. Chrissy." He sounded uncertain. Did he even know who she was?

"I've brought you some brownies. Like the kind we used to have, at the magazine. For old times' sake. May I come in?"

If she'd been a man and he'd been a woman, he probably wouldn't have taken the chain off. "That's nice, thank you, leave them outside the door." That would have been the wise response. As things were, he said, "I guess you'd better."

She followed him down a darkish hallway toward what she supposed must be the living room. He was wearing Bermuda shorts and a tee; his shoulders were rounded forward, and a patch of scalp on the back of his head gleamed whitely. Was he ill?

In the main room—big windows, a view of other condo buildings, light filled, the sofa and dining table standard IKEA, a little too close together—a comfortably plump woman in a pink hoodie was sitting in an armchair, knitting what looked like a sock. Stephen said, "This is Chrissy. We used to work in small publishing together. Chrissy, this is Rhoda. My wife."

A wife! Why hadn't any of them considered such a possibility? Because dickhead Stephen Q wasn't the marrying type, that was why. A wife altered everything: so much for her plan for a fake seduction.

But Chrissy was no longer focusing on the wife, who was making welcoming noises, "Come in, would you like some coffee?" and so forth. Instead, Chrissy was staring at Stephen, appalled. Unless he'd had plastic surgery, he was the wrong Stephen. The nicer one, not the meanie. This one hadn't been a groper and a pincher, leaning in too close behind, breathing down your neck, offering leer-filled invitations to post-work drinks at his, as he called it, "pad." This one had been shy, moonfaced, yearning but reluctant. There had been a mistake, to put it mildly. Nightmare!

She felt the weight of the brownies in her hands. Now what?

When in a tight corner, revert to babbling. That had usually worked for her. She launched in. "I thought, I mean, none of us is getting any younger and time is passing, it seems to go so quickly these days, and some of our generation is no longer as healthy as we were, in fact some of us are, well, some of us are no longer on the planet, and I felt maybe it would be the right thing to make a goodwill gesture, bury the hatchet as it were, before it gets too late, so I brought a little peace offering. I made them myself." Such a lie! But her entire statement was a lie, except for the part about not getting any younger. That was true enough.

The wrong Stephen looked confused. "What hatchet is that?" he asked.

Chrissy took a deep breath. "You know. That time when . . . it was maybe twenty years ago. Or fifteen. When Fern did that anthology, and a bunch of you, you all, when Humphrey Vacher felt insulted, and so he—"

"Oh. Yes," said Stephen. "That was ill-advised." He gazed down at the floor.

"Stephen told me about that," said Rhoda-the-wife in a kindly voice. "Shortly after we were married. I told him it had been a very childish thing to do, and said he should apologize to Fern."

"And did he?" Chrissy asked.

"Oh yes," said Rhoda. "He sent her a very well-phrased letter." Stephen was slightly flushed, gazing out the window as if none of this had anything to do with him. "Fern was very gracious. She wrote him a lovely note."

"A public apology would have been better," Chrissy said.

"Oh yes," said Rhoda. "I totally agree. But we didn't want to stir things up all over again, in the writing community, did we, Stephen? It wouldn't

have been helpful."

Except to Fern, Chrissy thought. "And Humphrey would have been furious, I expect," she said.

The wrong Stephen gave a short bark of laughter. "There's that," he said. The wrath of The Humph was not something he would have wished to face. "Or that was that then. Not sure he has the energy for fury anymore."

"Yes," said Rhoda. "So sad, a decline like that. Parkinson's is just terrible."

"So terrible!" Chrissy murmured. The Humph has Parkinson's? First she'd heard of it! "You wouldn't wish it on anyone."

"There," said Rhoda. "Hatchet buried! Now, let's have some coffee and your nice brownies. It was such a thoughtful gesture on your part."

"And did you?" says Leonie. "Have some of the nice brownies?" They're gathered together again, this time in Myrna's backyard. The cheese is a Cambozola, the crackers are made of wild rice. The grandkids are no longer running wild, they're back in their own homes and at school. Cal is barricaded inside the house, wanting nothing to do with this. Women are too devious, he says. He would have handled the matter more effectively, in his opinion, though he hasn't said what he actually would have done.

"What were my options?" says Chrissy. "I couldn't say, 'There's been a terrible mistake.' I couldn't say I was on a diet or something, and leave the brownies with them. That would have been suspicious, they'd have figured out later that I knew, and I could easily have been charged with intent to injure, or assault. Or bodily harm. Something."

"I see what you mean," says Myrna.

"So there I was, having coffee and Ex-Lax hash brownies with the two of them, cozy as could be," says Chrissy. "What else could I do?"

Leonie is laughing, a little too much. Myrna says, "And how were they? The brownies?"

"Effective," says Chrissy. "Though they didn't kick in until after I got home, thank goodness. It wasn't terminal, less than twenty-four hours, no worse than that stuff you drink for a colonoscopy, and anyway I was high at the time. I was careful to eat only one."

"What about Stephen and what's her name? Rhoda? Did they like them?" Leonie asks. She's laughing some more, which Chrissy finds slightly annoying. It was funny, but not that funny.

“They said, ‘These are delicious.’”

“Glad to hear it,” says Myrna. “I made them from a mix. With additions.”

“She had two, he had three,” says Chrissy. “I hope they didn’t end up in the hospital.”

“Karma’s a bitch,” says Leonie, “except sometimes it gets the wrong address.”

“Rhoda seemed very nice,” says Chrissy. “I feel bad about that.”

“She married the wrong person,” says Leonie. “It can be fatal. A lot of heads rolled in the French Revvie for that reason alone.”

“So Humphrey got away with it,” says Chrissy. “And I was whatchamacallit with my own petard, whatever that is.”

“Hoist,” says Myrna. “It’s from *Hamlet*. A petard was a little bomb or firecracker; ‘petard’ comes from the French verb ‘to fart.’”

“Appropriate,” says Leonie, laughing more.

“So what do you think?” says Myrna. “Do we go after The Humph, or not?”

Murder as such is off the table, they agree. So is diarrhea, as it is too chancy. In the end, they decide to case out the bookstores in Toronto and turn Humphrey’s books around on the shelves so that the spines face inward. That will serve him right! But when they attempt to execute this scheme, they can’t find his books in any of the bookstores at all.

This is the news they bring to Fern, when they all visit her at once in the middle of October. “We thought we’d cheer you up,” says Chrissy. She’s brought a little bouquet of lavender asters, mixed with salvia and purple echinacea from a sunny corner of her garden. Fern thanks her, and says Chrissy has always been so considerate.

“Humphrey’s books are pretty much out of print. Or out of stock, anyway,” says Myrna. She’s trying hard to repress a grin. “When we asked the kids in the stores, they didn’t know who he was.”

“Unlike you, Fern,” says Chrissy. “You’ve got big displays in there! Plus all the backlist!”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer person,” says Leonie. “I mean Humph, not you.”

“Oh dear,” says Fern. “Humphrey will be dismayed. If he knows,” she adds.

“He probably yells at the bookstores,” says Leonie. “They most likely tell him there’s been so much demand that he’s sold out.” She laughs.

“Poor Humphrey,” Fern says, with a little sigh. “He was so important, once.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo © Luis Mora

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than fifty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays, including the modern classic *The Handmaid's Tale* and its Booker Prize–winning sequel, *The Testaments*, and other novels such as *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, and the MaddAddam trilogy. Her acclaimed short works include the bestselling story *My Evil Mother* and the 2023 story collection *Old Babes in the Wood*, among others. She lives in Toronto, Canada.

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