

I SIT IN MY ROOM, at the window, waiting. In my lap is a handful of crumpled stars.

This could be the last time I have to wait. But I don't know what I'm waiting for. What are you waiting for? they used to say. That meant *hurry up*. No answer was expected. For what are you waiting is a different question, and I have no answer for that one either.

Yet it isn't waiting, exactly. It's more like a form of suspension. Without suspense. At last there is no time.

I am in disgrace, which is the opposite of grace. I ought to feel worse about it.

But I feel serene, at peace, pervaded with indifference. Don't let the bastards grind you down. I repeat this to myself but it conveys nothing. You might as well say, Don't let there be air; or, Don't be.

I suppose you could say that.

There's nobody in the garden.

I wonder if it will rain.

Outside, the light is fading. It's reddish already. Soon it will be dark. Right now it's darker. That didn't take long.

There are a number of things I could do. I could set fire to the house, for instance. I could bundle up some of my clothes, and the sheets, and strike my one hidden match. If it didn't catch, that would be that. But if it did, there would at least be an event, a signal of some kind to mark my exit.

A few flames, easily put out. In the meantime I could let loose clouds of smoke and die by suffocation.

I could tear my bedsheet into strips and twist it into a rope of sorts and tie one end to the leg of my bed and try to break the window. Which is shatterproof.

I could go to the Commander, fall on the floor, my hair disheveled, as they say, grab him around the knees, confess, weep, implore. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, I could say. Not a prayer. I visualize his shoes, black, well shined, impenetrable, keeping their own counsel.

Instead I could noose the bedsheet round my neck, hook myself up in the closet, throw my weight forward, choke myself off.

I could hide behind the door, wait until she comes, hobbles along the hall, bearing whatever sentence, penance, punishment, jump out at her, knock her down, kick her sharply and accurately in the head. To put her out of her misery, and myself as well. To put her out of our misery.

It would save time.

I could walk at a steady pace down the stairs and out the front door and along the street, trying to look as if I knew where I was going, and see how far I could get. Red is so visible.

I could go to Nick's room, over the garage, as we have done before. I could wonder whether or not he would let me in, give me shelter. Now that the need is real.

I consider these things idly. Each one of them seems the same size as all the others. Not one seems preferable. Fatigue is here, in my body, in my legs and eyes. That is what gets you in the end. Faith is only a word, embroidered.

I look out at the dusk and think about its being winter. The snow falling, gently, effortlessly, covering everything in soft crystal, the mist of moonlight before a rain, blurring the

outlines, obliterating color. Freezing to death is painless, they say, after the first chill. You lie back in the snow like an angel made by children and go to sleep.

Behind me I feel her presence, my ancestress, my double, turning in mid-air under the chandelier, in her costume of stars and feathers, a bird stopped in flight, a woman made into an angel, waiting to be found. By me this time. How could I have believed I was alone in here? There were always two of us. Get it over, she says. I'm tired of this melodrama, I'm tired of keeping silent. There's no one you can protect, your life has value to no one. I want it finished.

As I'm standing up I hear the black van. I hear it before I see it; blended with the twilight, it appears out of its own sound like a solidification, a clotting of the night. It turns into the driveway, stops. I can just make out the white eye, the two wings. The paint must be phosphorescent. Two men detach themselves from the shape of it, come up the front steps, ring the bell. I hear the bell toll, ding-dong, like the ghost of a cosmetics woman, down in the hall.

Worse is coming, then.

I've been wasting my time. I should have taken things into my own hands while I had the chance. I should have stolen a knife from the kitchen, found some way to the sewing scissors. There were the garden shears, the knitting needles; the world is full of weapons if you're looking for them. I should have paid attention.

But it's too late to think about that now, already their feet are on the dusty-rose carpeting of the stairs; a heavy muted tread, pulse in the forehead. My back's to the window.

I expect a stranger, but it's Nick who pushes open the door, flicks on the light. I can't place that, unless he's one of them. There was always that possibility. Nick, the private Eye. Dirty work is done by dirty people.

You shit, I think. I open my mouth to say it, but he comes

over, close to me, whispers. "It's all right. It's Mayday. Go with them." He calls me by my real name. Why should this mean anything?

"Them?" I say. I see the two men standing behind him, the overhead light in the hallway making skulls of their heads. "You must be crazy." My suspicion hovers in the air above him, a dark angel warning me away. I can almost see it. Why shouldn't he know about Mayday? All the Eyes must know about it; they'll have squeezed it, crushed it, twisted it out of enough bodies, enough mouths by now.

"Trust me," he says; which in itself has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee.

But I snatch at it, this offer. It's all I'm left with.

One in front, one behind, they escort me down the stairs. The pace is leisurely, the lights are on. Despite the fear, how ordinary it is. From here I can see the clock. It's no time in particular.

Nick is no longer with us. He may have gone down the back stairs, not wishing to be seen.

Serena Joy stands in the hallway, under the mirror, looking up, incredulous. The Commander is behind her, the sitting room door is open. His hair is very gray. He looks worried and helpless, but already withdrawing from me, distancing himself. Whatever else I am to him, I am also at this point a disaster. No doubt they've been having a fight, about me; no doubt she's been giving him hell. I still have it in me to feel sorry for him. Moira is right, I am a wimp.

"What has she done?" says Serena Joy. She wasn't the one who called them, then. Whatever she had in store for me, it was more private.

"We can't say, ma'am," says the one in front of me. "Sorry."

"I need to see your authorization," says the Commander. "You have a warrant?"

I could scream now, cling to the banister, relinquish dignity. I could stop them, at least for a moment. If they're real they'll stay, if not they'll run away. Leaving me here.

"Not that we need one, sir, but all is in order," says the first one again. "Violation of state secrets."

The Commander puts his hand to his head. What have I been saying, and to whom, and which one of his enemies has found out? Possibly he will be a security risk, now. I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking. There have already been purges among them, there will be more. Serena Joy goes white.

"Bitch," she says. "After all he did for you."

Cora and Rita press through from the kitchen. Cora has begun to cry. I was her hope, I've failed her. Now she will always be childless.

The van waits in the driveway, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.

And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.

Juliet Mitchell, from "Women: the Longest Revolution" (New Left Review, 1966)

The situation of women is different from that of any other social group. This is because they are not one of a number of isolable units, but half a totality: the human species. Women are essential and irreplaceable; they cannot therefore be exploited in the same way as other social groups can. They are fundamental to the human condition, yet in their economic, social and political roles, they are marginal. It is precisely this combination — fundamental and marginal at one and the same time — that has been fatal to them. Within the world of men their position is comparable to that of an oppressed minority: but they also exist outside the world of men. The one state justifies the other and precludes protest. In advanced industrial society, women's work is only marginal to the total economy. Yet it is through work that man changes natural conditions and thereby produces society. Until there is a revolution in production, the labour situation will prescribe women's situation within the world of men. But women are offered a universe of their own: the family. Like woman herself, the family appears as a natural object, but it is actually a cultural creation. There is nothing inevitable about the form or role of the family any more than there is about the character or role of women. It is the function of ideology to present these given social types as aspects of Nature itself. Both can be exalted paradoxically, as ideals. The 'true' woman and the 'true' family are images of peace and plenty: in actuality they may both be sites of violence and despair. The apparently natural condition can be made to appear more attractive than the arduous advance of human beings towards culture. But what Marx wrote about the bourgeois myths of the Golden Ancient World describes precisely women's realm: '... in one way the child-like world of the ancients appears to be superior, and this is so, insofar as we seek for closed shape, form and established limitation. The ancients provide a narrow satisfaction, whereas the modern world leaves us unsatisfied or where it appears to be satisfied with itself, is vulgar and mean.'

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[T]he classical literature on the problem of woman's condition is predominantly economist in emphasis, stressing her simple subordination to the institutions of private property. Her biological status underpins both her weakness as a producer, in work relations, and her importance as a possession, in reproductive relations. The fullest and most recent interpretation gives both factors a psychological cast. The framework of discussion is an evolutionist one which nevertheless fails noticeably to project a convincing image of the future, beyond asserting that socialism will involve the liberation of women as one of its constituent 'moments'.

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Marx sees history as the development of man's transformation of nature, and thereby of himself — of human nature — in different modes of production. Today there are the technical possibilities for the humanization of the most

natural part of human culture. This is what a change in the mode of reproduction could mean.

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### From Nature to Culture

The problem of socialization poses more difficult questions. . . . But the need for intensive maternal care in the early years of a child's life does not mean that the present single sanctioned form of socialization — marriage and family — is inevitable. Far from it. The fundamental characteristic of the present system of marriage and family is in our society its *monolithism*: there is only one institutionalized form of inter-sexual or inter-generational relationship possible. It is that or nothing. This is why it is essentially a denial of life. For all human experience shows that intersexual and intergenerational relationships are infinitely various — indeed, much of our creative literature is a celebration of the fact — while the institutionalized expression of them in our capitalist society is utterly simple and rigid. It is the poverty and simplicity of the institutions in this area of life which are such an oppression. Any society will require some institutionalized and social recognition of personal relationships. But there is absolutely no reason why there should be only one legitimized form — and a multitude of unlegitimized experience. Socialism should properly mean not the abolition of the family, but the diversification of the socially acknowledged relationships which are today forcibly and rigidly compressed into it. This would mean a plural range of institutions — where the family is only one, and its abolition implies none. Couples living together or not living together, long-term unions with children, single parents bringing up children, children socialized by conventional rather than biological parents, extended kin groups, etc. — all these could be encompassed in a range of institutions which matched the free invention and variety of men and women. It would be illusory to try and specify these institutions. Circumstantial accounts of the future are idealist and worse, static. Socialism will be a process of change, of becoming. A fixed image of the future is in the worst sense ahistorical; the form that socialism takes will depend on the prior type of capitalism and the nature of its collapse. As Marx wrote: 'What (is progress) if not the absolute elaboration of (man's) creative dispositions, without any preconditions other than antecedent historical evolution which makes the totality of this evolution — i.e. the evolution of all human powers as such, unmeasured by any *previously established* yardstick — an end in itself? What is this, if not a situation where man does not reproduce himself in any determined form, but produces his totality? Where he does not seek to remain something formed by the past, but is the absolute movement of becoming?' [Karl Marx, *Precapitalist Economic Formations*, in *Grundrisse*, transl. Martin Nicolaus, 488]. The liberation of women under socialism will not be 'rational' but a human achievement, in the long passage from Nature to Culture which is the definition of history and society.