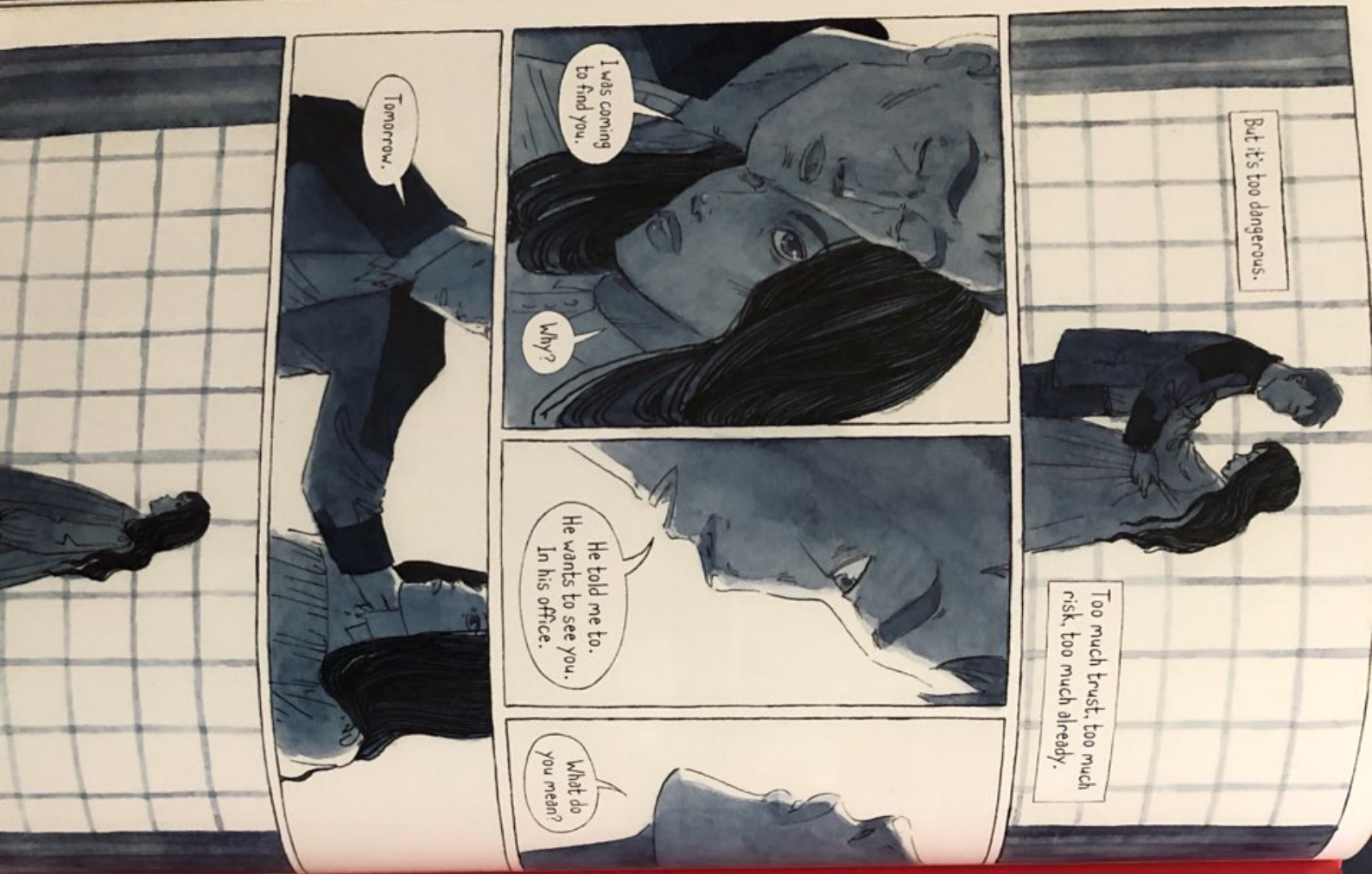




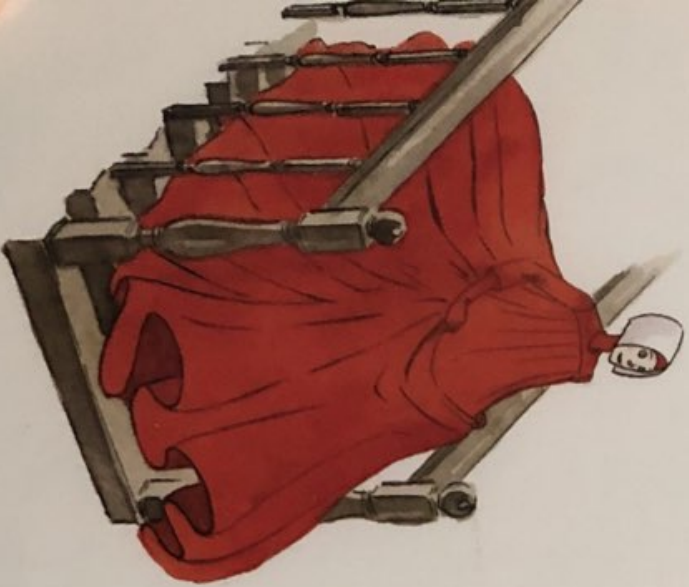
VIII

BIRTH DAY





WHEEEEEOOOOOOWHEEEEO



Hurry!
The Birthmobile
won't wait all day.



Who is it?

Oh Warren!



From above I can hear the chanting of the women who are already in Ofwarren's room.



The wives massage the tiny belly of the wife of Warren, just as if she's really about to give birth herself.



...oh, but you've been so lucky. Some of them, why, they aren't even clean.

And won't give you a smile, mope in their rooms, don't wash their hair, the smell, I have to get the Marthas to do it, almost have to hold her down in the tub...

I had to take stern measures with mine, and now she doesn't eat her dinner properly.

As for the other thing, not a nibble, and we've been so regular.



That's two in a month. Praise be! OfRobert -
No. It was a sinner.
To go through all of that and then...

The chances are one in four, we learned that at the Centre.

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules.

Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas Fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no antibiotic could touch.

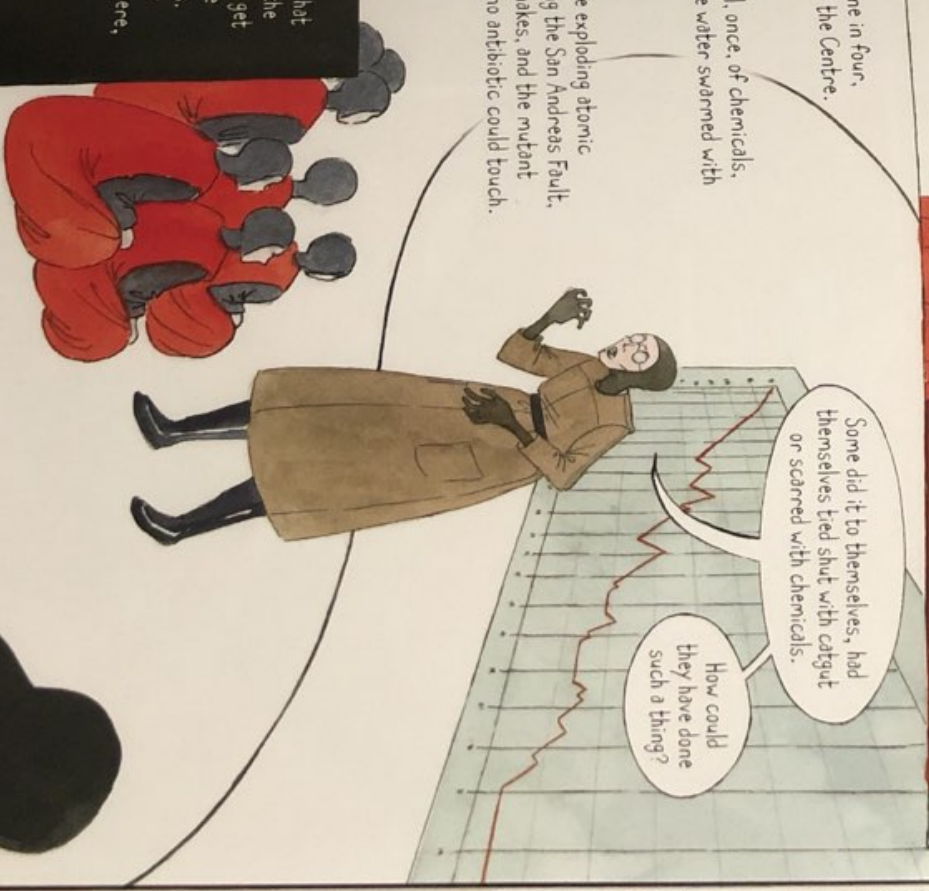
We didn't know what would happen to the babies that didn't get passed, that were declared Unbabies. But we knew they were put somewhere, quickly, away.

Some did it to themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals.

How could they have done such a thing?

What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby? Or an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet?

There's no telling. They could tell once, with machines, but that's now outlawed. What would be the point, anyway? You can't have them taken out, whatever it is must be carried to term.





Breathe,
breathe.

Hold,
hold.

Expel, expel,
expel.

Breathe,
breathe.

Hold,
hold.

Expel, expel,
expel.



Sometimes you can find
things out, on Birth Days.

Are you
looking for
anyone?

Moira.
Short hair,
freckles.

No.
But I'll watch
for you.

Are you?

Alma.

There is no point in
asking about Luke.
He wouldn't be where any of these
women would be likely to see him.



She's going into transition.



Pant!

Pant!

Pant!



I WANT TO GO OUTSIDE. I WANT TO GO FOR A WALK



NO!

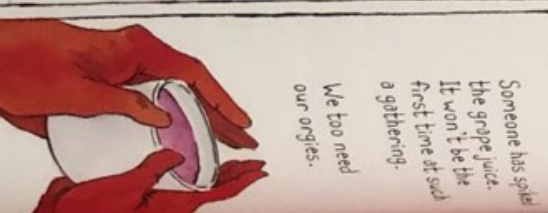
Oh no, oh no oh no...

It's her second baby. She had another child, once. So she ought to remember this, what it's like, what's coming. But who can remember pain, once it's over? All that remains of it is a shadow, not in the mind even, in the flesh.

Pain marks you,

but too deep to see.

Out of sight, out of mind.



Someone has spilt the grape juice. It won't be the first time at such a gathering. We too need our orgies.

Dim the lights.

Move her to the Birthing Stool.



Tell the Commander's wife it's time...





Push.

push.

push.

Relax.

Pant.

Push.

push.

push.

Push.

push.

push.

Relax.

Pant.

Push.

push.

push.



A girl, poor thing, but so far so good, at least
there's nothing wrong with it, that can be seen.
Hands, feet, eyes, we silently count,
everything is in place.



Angela.



Angela, Angela.

What a
sweet name!

Oh, she's
perfect!

Oh, she's
wonderful!



For the ones who come
after you, it will be easier.
They will accept their duties
with willing hearts.

You are a transitional
generation. It is the hardest
for you. We know the
sacrifices you are being
expected to make.

She did not say: Because they will have
no memories, of any other way.
She said: Because they won't want
things they can't have.



Consider the alternatives.
You see what things used to be
like? That's what they thought
of women, then.



There is more
than one kind of
freedom.

Freedom to and
freedom from.

In the days of anarchy
it was freedom to. Now you
are being given freedom from.

Don't underrate it.





Imagine: Wasting their time like that, when they should have been doing something useful.

Back then, the unwomen were always wasting time.



Mother...



I had you when I was thirty-seven. It was a risk, and did I get shit from some quarters!

"Birth defect rate goes up after thirty-five" and "It's so hard to be a single parent."

Fuck that shit. I told them.



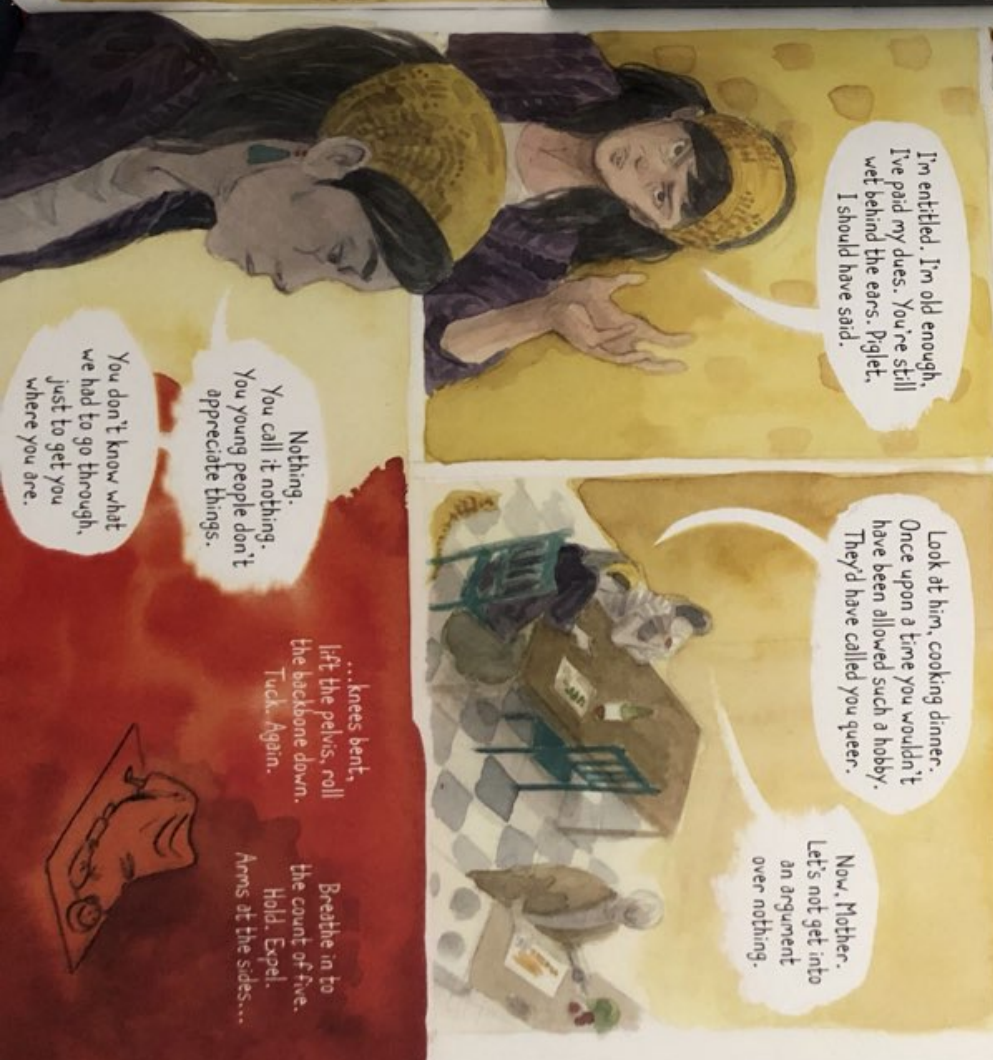
I make a decent salary. I don't need a man around. I don't need a man except what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies.

Oh, I don't know, men seem to have done all right for themselves, inventing civilization and all.

Anyway, I've heard women are incapable of abstract thought.

Chauvinist pig.

Isn't she quaint.



I'm entitled. I'm old enough. I've paid my dues. You're still wet behind the ears. Piglet. I should have said.

Look at him, cooking dinner. Once upon a time you wouldn't have been allowed such a hobby. They'd have called you queer.

Now, Mother. Let's not get into an argument over nothing.

Nothing. You call it nothing. You young people don't appreciate things.

You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are.

...knees bent, lift the pelvis, roll the backbone down. Tuck. Again.

Breathe in to the count of five. Hold. Expel. Arms at the sides...



Remember:

I will greatly multiply thy
sorrow and thy conception;
in sorrow thou shalt
bring forth children.

In the time before,
they drugged women, induced
labour, cut them open.
Doctors – men – used to be
in charge of births.



But now, now you will
help your sisters in their
time of sorrow, as they
will help you in yours.



Mother, wherever you may be. Can you hear me?
You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there
is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists.
Be thankful for small mercies.



Did you
hear?

About
Moire?

I heard it
from Joanne...



The story passed among us that night, under our breath, from bed to bed.
Moire had raised her hand to go to the washroom, during Exercises...



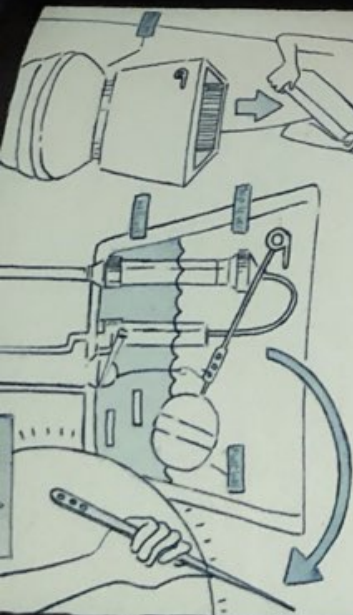
Um... The toilet's
overflowing. Can
someone come
fix it?



Don't move, or I'll stick it
all the way in. I know where.
I'll puncture your lung.



They found out afterwards that she'd dismantled
the inside of one of the toilets and taken out the
long thin pointed lever, the part that attaches to
the handle at one end and the chain at the other.



Aunt Elizabeth knew Moire meant what
she said. Moire had a bad reputation.





She's still out there.

Where do you suppose....

...could be anywhere!

...or dead.

What'll she do?

Mora was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing our taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure.

Nevertheless Mora was our fantasy. We expected her to be dragged in at any minute, as she had been before. We could not imagine what they might do to her this time. It would be very bad, whatever it was.

But nothing happened. Mora didn't reappear. She hasn't yet.

My presence here is illegal.

It's forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices.

So why does he want to see me, at night, alone?

If I'm caught, it's to Seren's tender mercies I'll be delivered. Reclassification. I could become an Unwoman.

But to refuse him could be worse. There's no doubt about who holds the real power.

But there must be something he wants, from me.

To want is to have a weakness. It's like a small crack in a wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear.

I want to know what he wants.





This was once the game of old women,
old men, in the summers or in retirement
villas, to be played when there was nothing
good on television.

Now, of course,
it's something different.
Now it's forbidden, for us.
Now it's dangerous.

Now it's indecent.
Now it's something
he can't do with his wife.

The counters are like candies,
made of peppermint, cool like that.

This is freedom, an eyblink of it.

I would like to put them into my mouth. They would
taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the
tongue, delicious.





I win the first game, I let him win the second: I still haven't discovered what the terms are, what I will be able to ask for, in exchange.



I guess it's about time for you to go home.
To your room, that is.



Thank you.
For the game....



This is like being on a date.
This is conspiracy.



Not like that.
As if you meant it.



I want you to kiss me.



All right.



IX NIGHT

Something has changed.
Circumstances have altered.

I need to take it seriously, this desire of his.
It could be important, it could be a passport,
it could be my downfall.



He wanted me to play
Scrabble with him.

And kiss him
as if I meant it.

I can ask for
something.

Possibly not much,
but something.

HAI





ACUTE
BASTARDY
CAREFUL

Why did she write it?
Why bother?



There's no way out of here.

X
SOUL SCROLLS





What's wrong?

Oh!
I thought...

Like...



I'll have to bring
another one. Such a waste.
What was you doing on the
floor like that?

It did give me
a turn...

At first I thought
it was just clothes, like.
Then I said to myself, what're
they doing on the floor?

I thought
maybe you'd...

I must have
fainted.

No, it's not that.
I was just dizzy.

It's one of the
early signs!



That's why she screamed.

So it was Gore who found her.



That was in May. Spring has now been undergone. The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth.



The Commander and I have an arrangement.

I visit him two or three nights a week, always after dinner, but only when I get the signal.



The signal is Nick. If his hat is on askew, then I go.



I have a little present for you.



It's an old one. A curio of sorts. I thought you might like to look at it.



It's not permitted...



In here, it is.

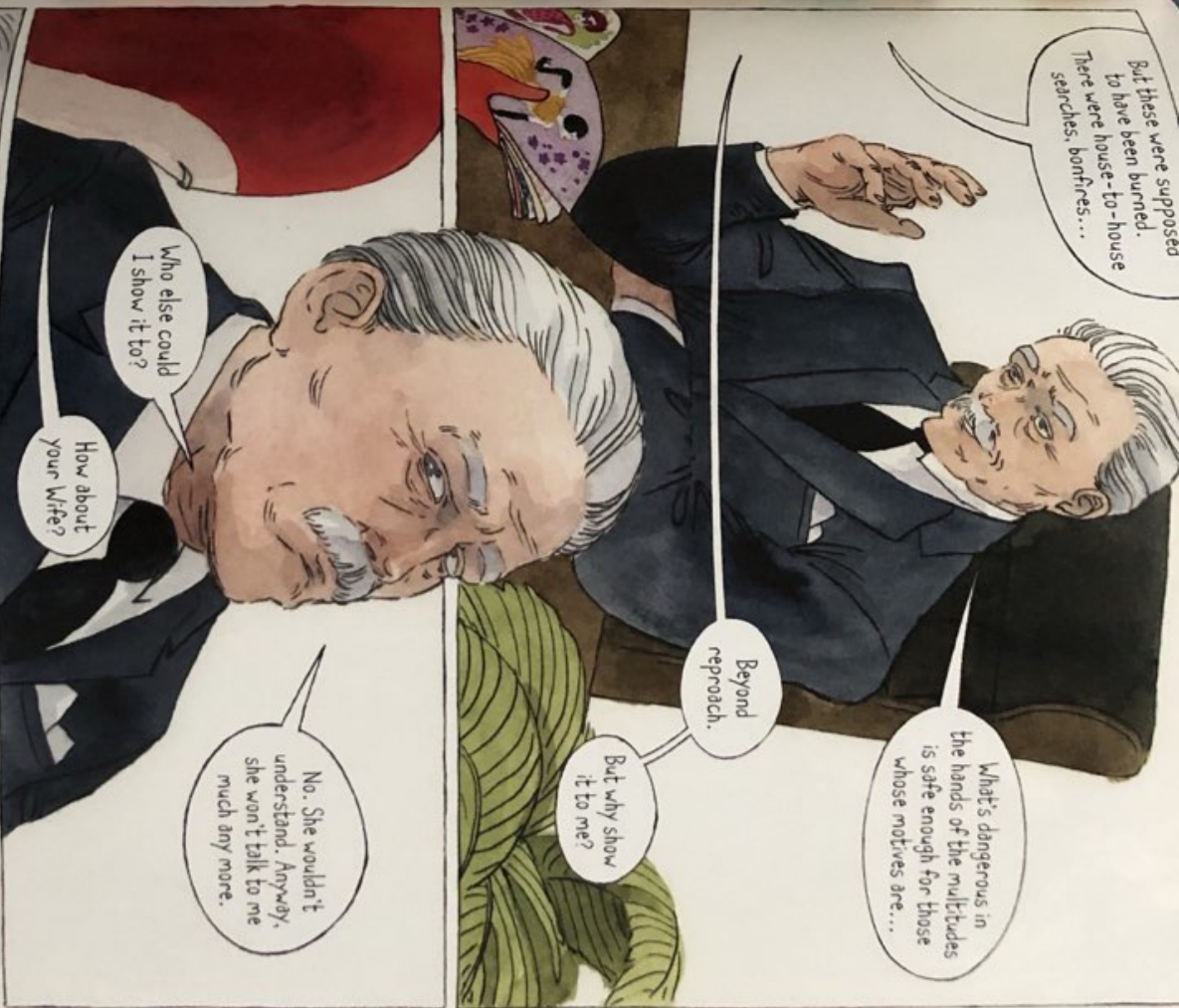
I felt the Commander watching me as I turned the pages. I knew I was doing something I shouldn't have been doing, and that he found pleasure in seeing me do it.



Why do you have this?

Some of us... retain an appreciation for the old things.

But these were supposed to have been burned. There were house-to-house searches, bonfires...



What's dangerous in the hands of the multitudes is safe enough for those whose motives are...

Beyond reproach.

But why show it to me?

No. She wouldn't understand. Anyway, she won't talk to me much any more.

Who else could I show it to?

How about your wife?

We don't seem to have much in common, these days.

That's what I was there for, then. The same old thing. It was too banal to be true.





Try to touch me like that, when we're... when she's there.



Did I?

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. But I find it...

You could get me transferred! To the Colonies. You know that. Or worse.



What?

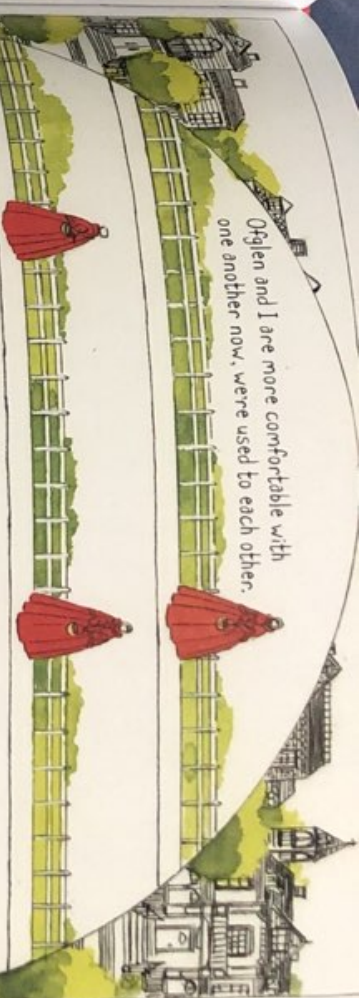
Impersonal.



How long did it take you to find that out?



Ogden and I are more comfortable with one another now, we're used to each other.



Now and again we vary the route; there's nothing against it, as long as we stay within the barriers.

A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze.



Nothing on the Wall today, they don't leave the bodies hanging as long in summer as they do in winter, because of the flies and the smell.



Somewhere the Wall is even more forboding when it's empty like this. But vacant, it is also potential, like a storm approaching. When I can see the bodies, the actual bodies, when I can guess the sizes and shapes that none of them is Luke, I can believe also that he is still alive.



There used to be an ice cream store on this block.

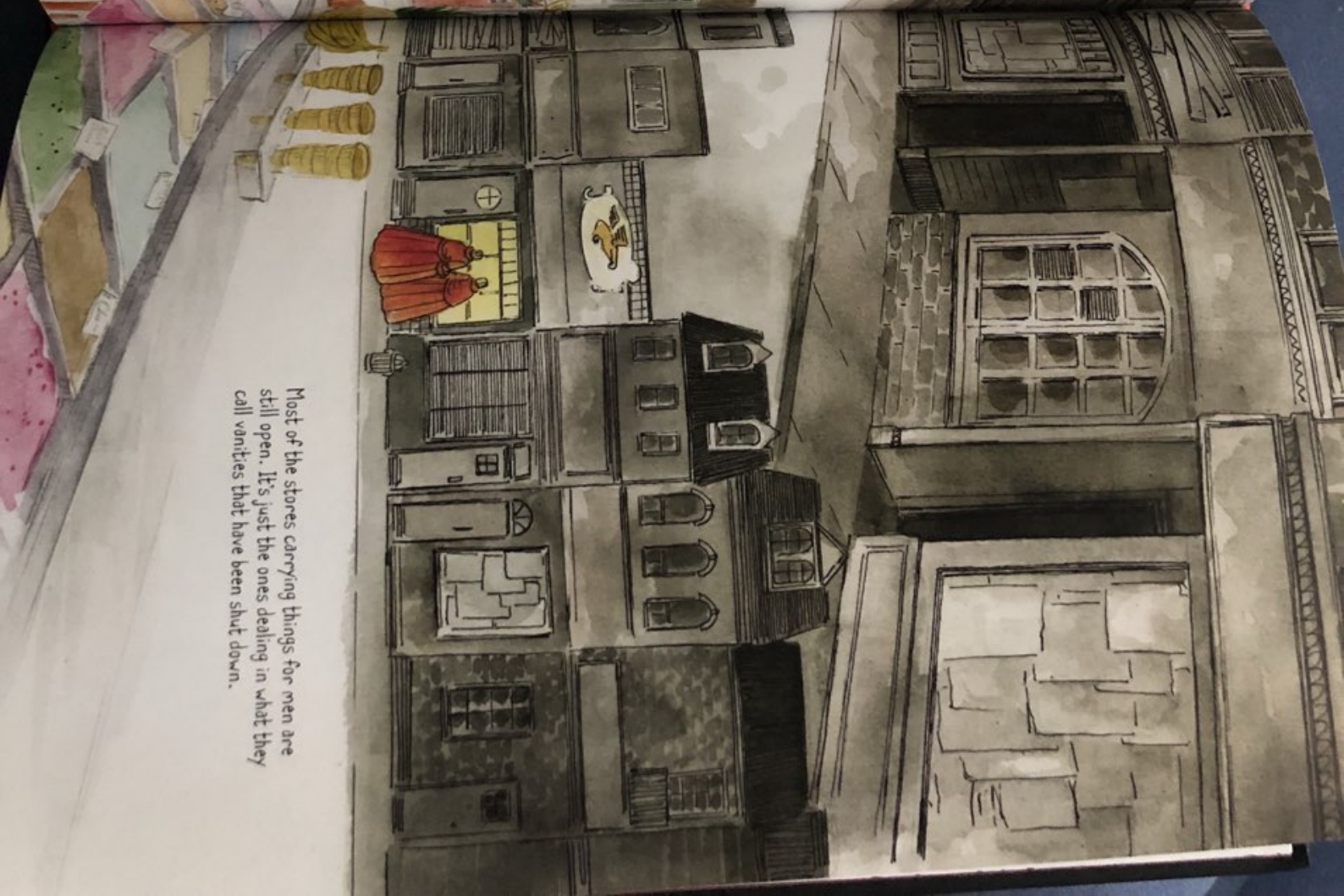
You could get double scoops. If you wanted they would put chocolate sprinkles on top.

I'd read the names to her so she could choose.

She wouldn't choose by the name, though, but by the colour. Her dresses and overalls were those colours too. Ice cream pastels.



Most of the stores carrying things for men are still open. It's just the ones dealing in what they call vanities that have been shut down.



Soul Scrolls.

It's a franchise:
there are Soul Scrolls
in every city centre,
in every suburb, or
so they say. It must
make a lot of profit.



What the machines print is prayers:
for health, wealth, a death, a birth, a sin.

You pick the one you want, punch in your number
so your account will be debited, and punch in the
number of times you want the prayer repeated.

The machines talk as they print out the prayers, if you
like, you can go inside and listen to them, the toneless
metallic voices repeating the same thing over and over.

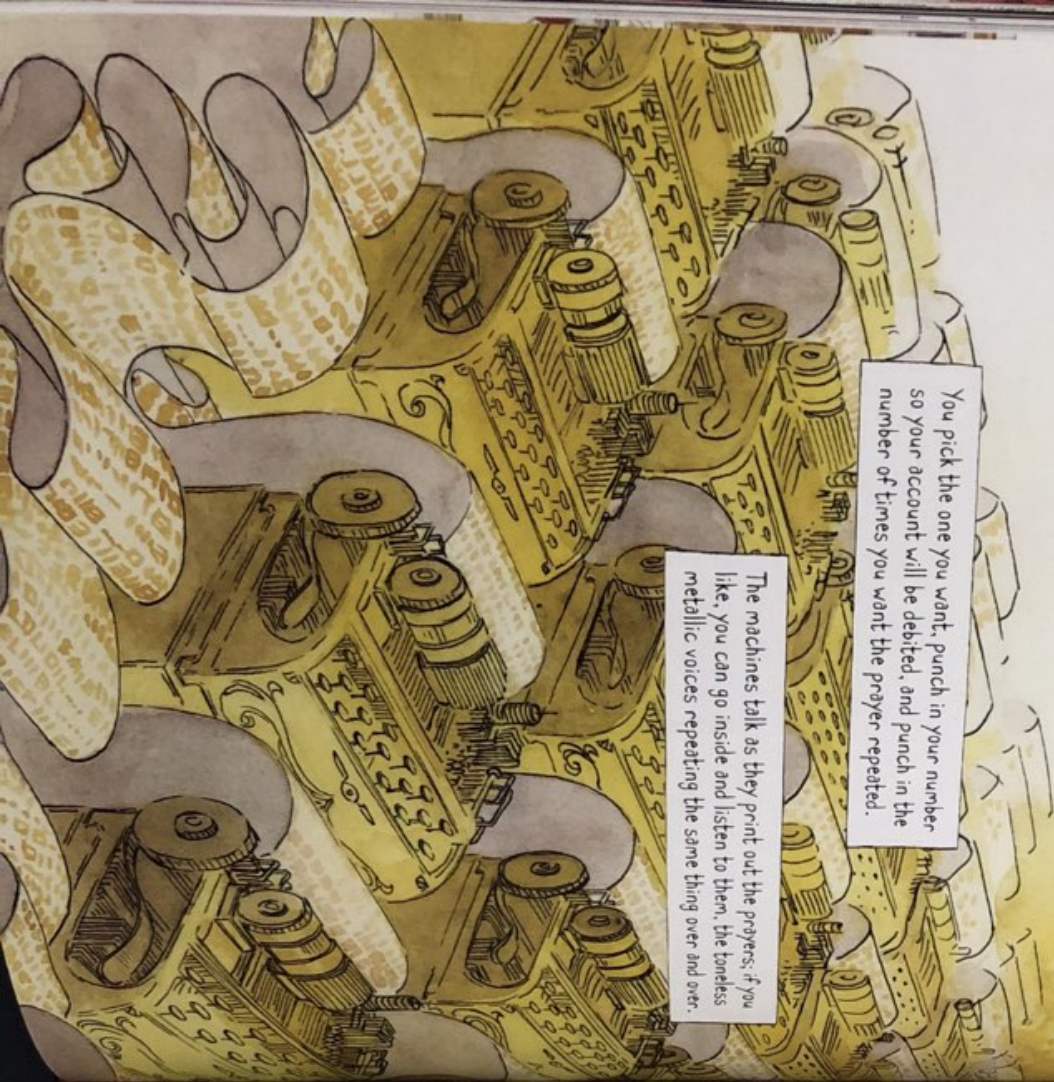


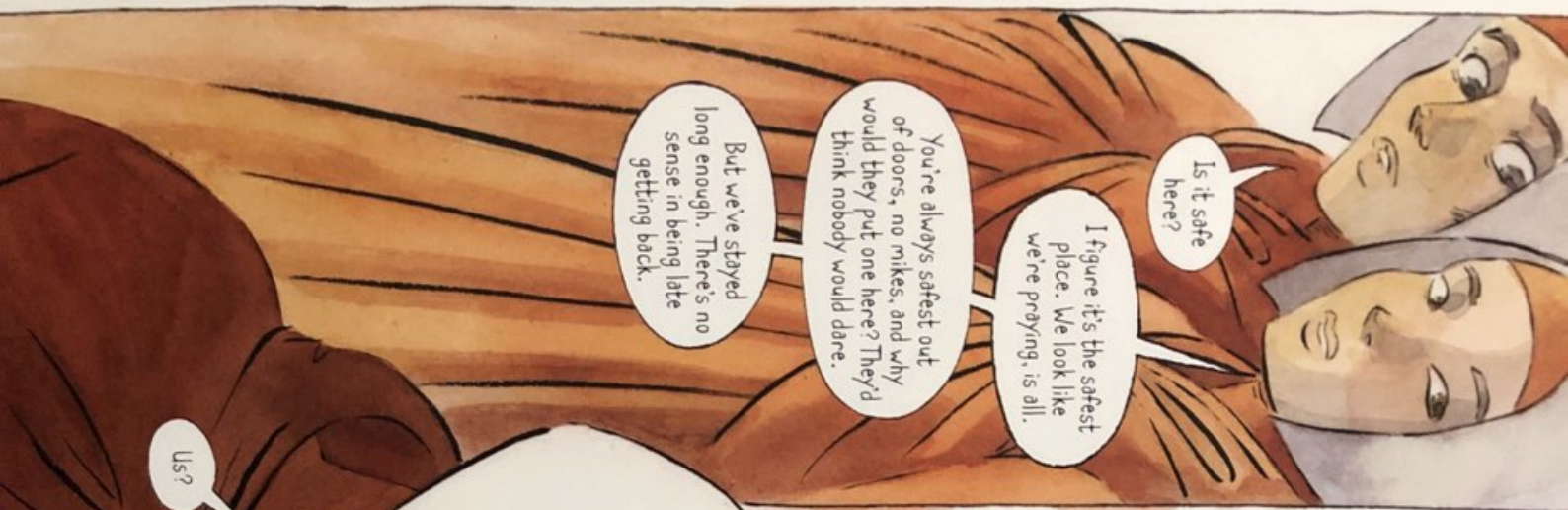
Do you think
God listens to
these machines?



No.

In the past this would have been a trivial
enough remark. Now it's treason. We have
crossed the invisible line together.





Is it safe here?

I figure it's the safest place. We look like we're praying, is all.

You're always safest out of doors, no mikes, and why would they put one here? They'd think nobody would dare.

But we've stayed long enough. There's no sense in being late getting back.



Keep your head down as we walk. And lean just a little towards me. That way I can hear you better. Don't talk when there's anyone coming.

I thought you were a true believer.

I thought you were.

You were always so stinking pious.

So were you!

You can join us.

Us?

You didn't think I was the only one.



Don't say a word.

Of course, I won't.

Who could I tell?







What I feel is relief.
It wasn't me.



If you disapprove,
just say it.

Well, yeah,
matter of fact
I do.
You're poaching on another
woman's ground, that's
what you're doing.



Luke isn't a fish!
Or a piece of dirt either.
He's a human being. He can
make his own decisions.

You're
rationalizing.

I'm in love!

That's
no excuse.

Of course you don't
have this problem any more.
Seems you don't have any scruples
about stealing women - or
borrowing them - whenever
you feel like it.

Different situation.
The balance of power is equal
between two women, so sex is
an even-steven transaction.



Even-steven
is a sexist phrase.

Ha!

And anyway
that argument's
outdated.



Outdated? So you figure
men and women are equal
now, huh? Thanks, feminism,
but we're all good now, mission
accomplished! You're living with
your head in the sand.



There's more
than one way to live
with your head in
the sand!

If you think you can create
a Utopia by shutting yourself
up in a women-only enclave,
you're sadly mistaken.



Sure about that?

Men aren't just going
to go away, Mona. They're
half the population! You can't
just ignore them.

That's like saying
you should go out and
catch syphilis merely
because it exists.

Are you calling
Luke a social
disease?

She was my oldest friend.

Is.



In those days I worked transferring books to computer discs. Discers, we called ourselves. We called the library a discolleque, which was a joke of ours.

All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing. Now it's like remembering the paper money, when they still had that.

It was obsolete by then, you couldn't buy anything with it.

My mother kept some of it, pasted into her scrapbook along with the early photos.

By the time I was nine or ten most people used plastic cards. I guess that's how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand. If there had still been portable money, it would have been more difficult.

It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency.

They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time.

That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets.

Keep calm.
Everything is
under control.



People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on.



Look out. Here it comes.

Here what comes?

You wait. They've been building up to this.



Newspapers were censored and some were closed down, for security reasons they said. The roadblocks began to appear, and Identi-passes. Everyone approved of that, since it was obvious you couldn't be too careful.



Did you see? They've shut down the Pornomarts! We've been fighting to get those shit holes banned for ages.

Right result, wrong reason. And it's not stopping there, you can count on it.

They're scanning Identi-passes at all the bridges now. They're saying there was another bomb scare, or something...

...that new elections will be held, but a government insider we spoke to said that it would likely take some time to prepare for them...



Yeah, of course I will.

Listen, Luke, can you drive her to school tomorrow? I know the School Pool's supposed to do it, but there've been so many disappearances...

Her about the Pornomarts? Gone. The Feels on Wheels vans and Run-Die Buggies too.



Yeah. Good riddance.

Course they probably just moved them off somewhere else.



Trying to get rid of it altogether is like trying to stamp out mice, you know?





The next morning, on my way to the library, I stopped by the same store for another pack, because I'd run out.

I was smoking more in those days, it was the tension, you could feel it like a subterranean hum, although things seemed so quiet.



She sick?

Who?
The woman who's usually here.

Sorry.
This number's not valid.

That's ridiculous.
It must be, I've got thousands in my account.
Try it again.

How would I know.



Not valid.
See?

INVALID PLEASE
You must have made a mistake.
Try it again.

See?
I'll phone them from the office.

You do that.



Goddamn it!

—currently busy with higher than usual call volume, your phone back is important to me.



Something wrong, boss?

I...
I have something to tell you all.

I'm sorry.
But it's the law.
I really am
sorry.

For what?

I have to let
you go.

It's the law.
I have to. I have to
let you all go.

We're being
fired? But
why?

Not
fired. Let go.

You can't work
here any more,
it's the law.

You can't
just do that..

You don't understand.
Please go, now. I don't
want any trouble.

If there's trouble
the books might be lost.
things will get broken...

They're
outside.

If you don't
go now they'll come
in themselves.

Since none of us understood
what had happened, there was
nothing much we could say.

We looked at one another's faces and saw dismay,
and a certain shame, as if we'd been caught doing
something we shouldn't.

What was it about this that
made us feel we deserved it?

Tried getting
anything on your
Compucard today?

They've frozen them. Mine too.
Any account with an F on it instead of
an M. All they needed to do was push
a few buttons. We're cut off.

But I've got over
two thousand dollars
in the bank!

Women can't
hold property any more.
It's a new law. Turned
on the TV today?

Luke can use your
Compucount for you. They'll
transfer your number to him,
or that's what they say.

Husband or
male next
of kin.

But what
about you?

I'll go
underground.

But...why?
Why did they?

They had to do it that way.
The Compucounts and the jobs
both at once. Can you picture
the airports, otherwise?

They don't want us
going anywhere, you
can bet on that.



I heard. On the car radio, driving home. Don't worry. I'm sure it's temporary.

Did they say why?

Mommy!

We'll get through it.

You don't know what it's like. It's like somebody cut off my feet.

I guess you get all my money. And I'm not even dead.

Already I'm starting to get paranoid.



It's only a job.



Hush. You know I'll always take care of you.

Already he's starting to patronize me.



What's the matter?

I don't know.



No, I'm sorry.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean...



We? No one's taken anything from you, that I'm aware of.

We still have each other.



But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me up, I was small as a doll. He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his. So Luke, what I want to ask you now, what I need to know is, Was I right? Because we never talked about it. By the time I could have done that, I was afraid to. I couldn't afford to lose you.



Zlich.

Is that a word?

We could look it up. It's archaic.

I'll give it to you.



Maybe you could tell me something I've been wondering about.

What might that be?

It's a phrase I remember from somewhere. I think it's in Latin.

I could spell it. Write it down.



All right.



Heh.

That's not real Latin. That's just a joke.

A joke?

What sort of a joke?



It's sort of hard to explain why it's funny unless you know Latin. We used to write all kinds of things like that - you know how schoolboys are.

But what did it mean?



Oh, it meant, "Don't let the bastards grind you down." I guess we thought we were pretty smart, back then.

I can see why she wrote that, in the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learned it, here, in this room. Where else? She was never a schoolboy.

I have not been the first, then.

What happened to her?

Did you know her somehow?

Somehow.



She hanged herself.

That's why we had the light fixture removed. In your room...

Serena found out.

As if this explains it. And it does.

If your dog dies, get another.

XI
NIGHT

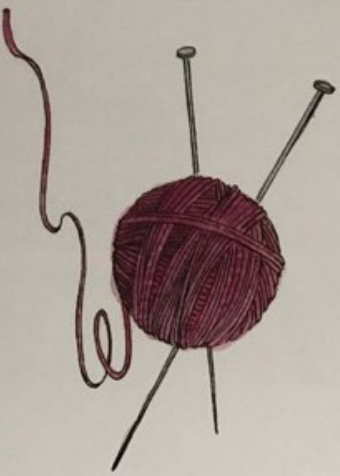
That's where she was swinging,
just lightly, like a pendulum;
the way you could swing as a child,
hanging by your hands from a branch.



Maybe she's still in here, with me.
I feel buried.



XII JEZEBEL'S



Every night when I go to bed I think, In the morning I will wake up in my own house and things will be back the way they were.

It hasn't happened this morning, either.



Offed.

Come over here. I want you.

A lot of Wives knit scarves like this, for the Angels at the front lines. I can hardly believe the Angels have a need for such elaborate scarves.

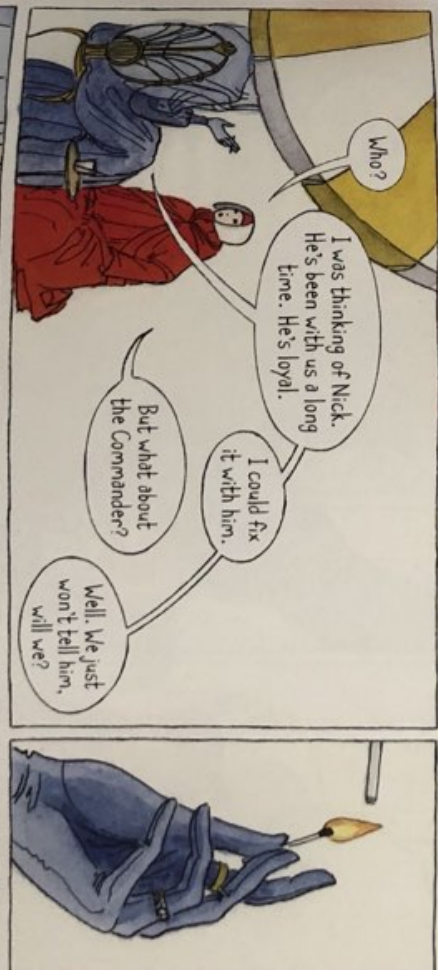
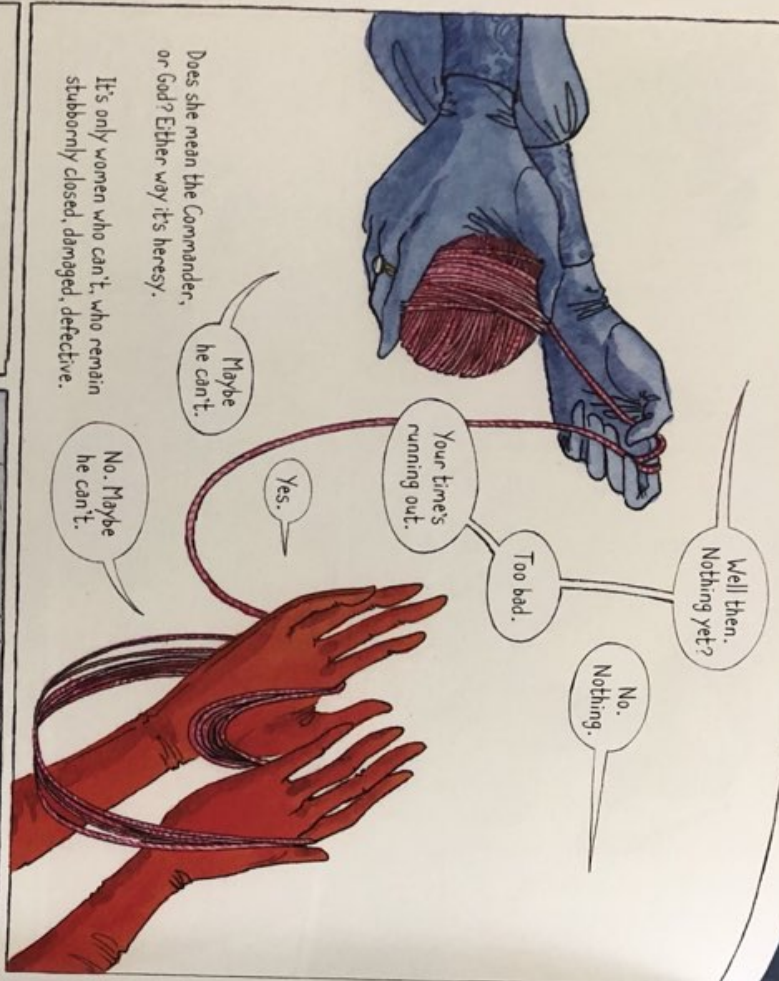


Sometimes I think these scarves aren't sent to the Angels at all, but unravelled and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted again in their turn. Maybe it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose.



I need you to hold this wool.

You can sit.



She knows where they've put her then, where they're keeping her. She's known all along. The bitch, not to tell me, bring me news, any news at all. Not even to let on.

But I can't say this.

I can't let go of this hope.



All right. Yes.



Find yourself a match. They're in the kitchen, you can ask Rita for one. Tell her I said so.



Only the one, though. We don't want to ruin your health!



We're off to the Proyvaganza, to demonstrate how obedient and pious we are.

I hear that's where the Eyes hold their banquets.

Who told you?



The grapevine.

There's a password.

A password? What for?

So you can tell. Who is and who isn't.

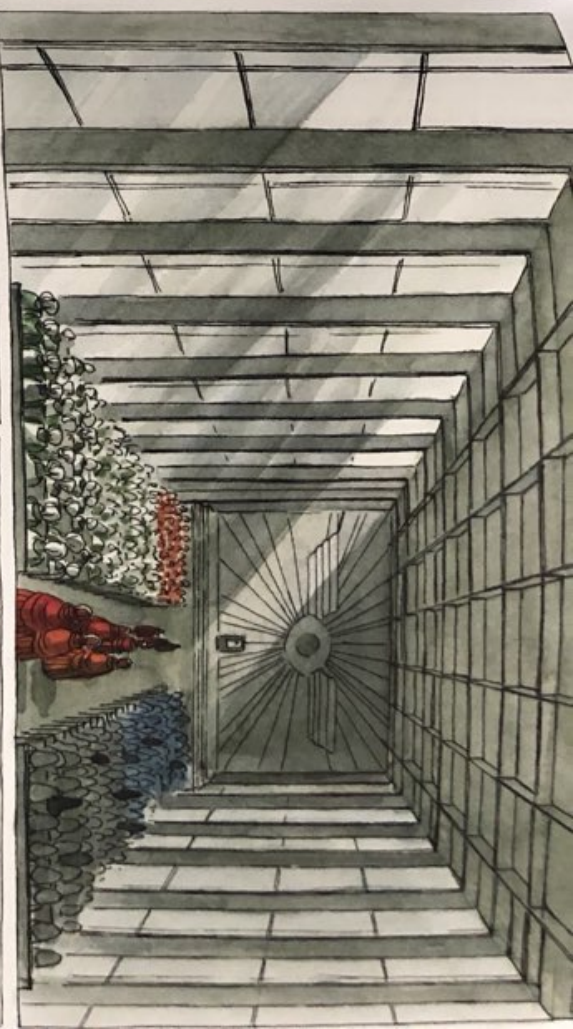
What is it then?



Myddy. I tried it on you once.

Myddy.









What did you hit me for? Wasn't it good? I can bring you another. You didn't have to hit me...



Look at me.

My name is Moira and this is the Red Centre.

Look at me.



They won't send you to the Infirmary, so don't even think about it. They won't mess around with trying to cure you. They won't even bother to ship you to the Colonies.

You go too far away and they just take you up to the Chemistry Lab and shoot you. Then they burn you up with the garbage, like an Unwoman. So forget it.



I want to go home.



Jesus God.

That's enough. She'll be here in one minute. I promise you. So put your goddamn clothes on and shut up.

That stuff is catching.

She does that again and I'm not here, you just have to slip her like that. You can't let her go slipping over the edge.



Join me now in singing Hymn 734: "There is a Balm in Gilead."



There is a Balm in Gilead O perfect gift of Thine...

On bended knee we humbly see Thy sacrifice divine...



Newly returned from the front. See the medals!

Praise be.



The marriages are of course arranged. These girls haven't been allowed to be alone with a man for years, for however many years we've been doing this.

