

*June Osborne, the main character, describes what happens in the United States after an imaginary American Civil War. On that particular day, her boss comes in to make an announcement to the women in his company.*

I'm sorry, he said, but it's the law. I really am sorry. For what? somebody said.

I have to let you go, he said. It's the law. I have to. I have to let you all go. He said this almost gently, as if we were wild animals, frogs he'd caught, in a jar, as if he were being humane.

We're being fired? I said. I stood up. But why?

5 Not fired, he said. Let go. You can't work here any more, it's the law. He ran his hands through his hair and I thought, he's gone crazy. The strain has been too much for him and he's blown his wiring<sup>1</sup>.

You can't just *do* that, said the woman who sat next to me. This sounded false, improbable, like something you would say on television.

10 It isn't me, he said. You don't understand. Please go, now. His voice was rising. I don't want any trouble. If there's trouble the books might be lost, things will get broken ... He looked over his shoulder. They're outside, he said, in my office. If you don't go now they'll come in themselves. They gave me ten minutes. By now he sounded crazier than ever.

He's loopy, someone said out loud; which we must all have thought.

15 But I could see out into the corridor, and there were two men standing there, in uniforms, with machine guns. This was too theatrical to be true, yet there they were: sudden apparitions, like Martians. There was a dreamlike quality to them; they were too vivid, too at odds with their surroundings. [...]

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<sup>1</sup> He's lost his mind

I've been fired, I told Moira when I got her on the phone. She said she would come over. By that time she was working for a women's collective, the publishing division. They put out books on birth control and rape and things like that, though there wasn't as much demand for those things as there used to be.

I'll come over, she said. She must have been able to tell from my voice that this was what I wanted. She got there after some time. So, she said. She threw off her jacket, sprawled into the oversized chair. Tell me. First we'll have a drink.

She got up and went to the kitchen and poured us a couple of Scotches, and came back and sat down and I tried to tell her what had happened to me. When I'd finished, she said, 'Tried getting anything on your Compucard today?'

Yes, I said. I told her about that too.

They've frozen them, she said. Mine too. The collective's 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, I said, as if my own account was the only one that mattered.

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

*Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, 1985*