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# **The Edible Woman**

Written by Margaret Atwood

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MARGARET  
ATWOOD

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THE EDIBLE WOMAN



virago

# 1

I know I was all right on Friday when I got up; if anything I was feeling more stolid than usual. When I went out to the kitchen to get breakfast Ainsley was there, moping: she said she had been to a bad party the night before. She swore there had been nothing but dentistry students, which depressed her so much she had consoled herself by getting drunk.

‘You have no idea how soggy it is,’ she said, ‘having to go through twenty conversations about the insides of peoples’ mouths. The most reaction I got out of them was when I described an abcess I once had. They positively drooled. And most men look at something besides your *teeth*, for god’s sake.’

She had a hangover, which put me in a cheerful mood – it made me feel so healthy – and I poured her a glass of tomato juice and briskly fixed her an alka-seltzer, listening and making sympathetic noises while she complained.

‘As if I didn’t get enough of that at work,’ she said. Ainsley has a job as a tester of defective electric toothbrushes for an electric toothbrush company: a temporary job. What she is waiting for is an opening in one of those little art galleries, even though they don’t pay well: she wants to meet the artists. Last year, she told me, it was actors, but then she actually met some. ‘It’s an absolute fixation. I expect they all carry those bent mirrors around in their coat pockets and peer into their own mouths every time they go to the john to make sure they’re still cavity-free.’ She ran one hand reflectively through her hair, which is long and red, or rather auburn. ‘Could you imagine

kissing one? He'd say 'Open wide' beforehand. They're so bloody one-track.'

'It must have been awful,' I said, refilling her glass. 'Couldn't you have changed the topic?'

Ainsley raised her almost non-existent eyebrows, which hadn't been coloured in yet that morning. 'Of course not,' she said. 'I pretended to be terribly interested. And naturally I didn't let on what my job was: those professional men get so huffy if you know anything about their subject. You know, like Peter.'

Ainsley tends to make jabs at Peter, especially when she isn't feeling well. I was magnanimous and didn't respond. 'You'd better eat something before you go to work,' I said, 'it's better when you've got something on your stomach.'

'Oh god,' said Ainsley, 'I can't face it. Another day of machines and mouths. I haven't had an interesting one since last month, when that lady sent back her toothbrush because the bristles were falling off. We found out she'd been using Ajax.'

I got so caught up in being efficient for Ainsley's benefit while complimenting myself on my moral superiority to her that I didn't realize how late it was until she reminded me. At the electric toothbrush company they don't care what time you breeze in, but my company thinks of itself as punctual. I had to skip the egg and wash down a glass of milk and a bowl of cold cereal which I knew would leave me hungry long before lunchtime. I chewed through a piece of bread while Ainsley watched me in nauseated silence and grabbed up my purse, leaving Ainsley to close the apartment door behind me.

We live on the top floor of a large house in one of the older and more genteel districts, in what I suppose used to be the servants' quarters. This means there are two flights of stairs between us and the front door, the higher flight narrow and slippery, the lower one wide and carpeted but with stair-rods

that come loose. In the high heels expected by the office I have to go down sideways, clutching the bannister. That morning I made it safely past the line of pioneer brass warming-pans strung on the wall of our stairway, avoided catching myself on the many-pronged spinning-wheel on the second-floor landing, and sidestepped quickly down past the ragged regimental flag behind glass and the row of oval-framed ancestors that guard the first stairway. I was relieved to see there was no one in the downstairs hall. On level ground I strode towards the door, swerving to avoid the rubber-plant on one side and the hall table with the écru doily and the round brass tray on the other. Behind the velvet curtain to the right I could hear the child performing her morning penance at the piano. I thought I was safe.

But before I reached the door it swung silently inward upon its hinges, and I knew I was trapped. It was the lady down below. She was wearing a pair of spotless gardening gloves and carrying a trowel. I wondered who she'd been burying in the garden.

'Good morning, Miss MacAlpin,' she said.

'Good morning.' I nodded and smiled. I can never remember her name, and neither can Ainsley; I suppose we have what they call a mental block about it. I looked past her towards the street, but she didn't move out of the doorway.

'I was out last night,' she said. 'At a meeting.' She has an indirect way of going about things. I shifted from one foot to the other and smiled again, hoping she would realize I was in a hurry. 'The child tells me there was another fire.'

'Well, it wasn't exactly a fire,' I said. The child had taken this mention of her name as an excuse to stop practising, and was standing now in the velvet doorway of the parlour, staring at me. She is a hulking creature of fifteen or so who is being sent to an exclusive private girls' school, and she has to wear a green

tunic with knee-socks to match. I'm sure she's really quite normal, but there's something cretinous about the hair-ribbon perched up on top of her gigantic body.

The lady down below took off one of her gloves and patted her chignon. 'Ah,' she said sweetly. 'The child says there was a lot of smoke.'

'Everything was under control,' I said, not smiling this time. 'It was just the pork chops.'

'Oh, I see,' she said. 'Well, I do wish you would tell Miss Tewce to try not to make quite so much smoke in future. I'm afraid it upsets the child.' She holds Ainsley alone responsible for the smoke, and seems to think she sends it out of her nostrils like a dragon. But she never stops Ainsley in the hall to talk about it: only me. I suspect she's decided Ainsley isn't respectable, whereas I am. It's probably the way we dress: Ainsley says I choose clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration, though I can't see anything wrong with that. She herself goes in for neon pink.

Of course I missed the bus: as I crossed the lawn I could see it disappearing across the bridge in a cloud of air pollution. While I was standing under the tree – our street has many trees, all of them enormous – waiting for the next bus, Ainsley came out of the house and joined me. She's a quick-change artist; I could never put myself together in such a short time. She was looking a lot healthier – possibly the effects of makeup, though you can never tell with Ainsley – and she had her red hair piled up on top of her head, as she always does when she goes to work. The rest of the time she wears it down in straggles. She had on her orange and pink sleeveless dress, which I judged was too tight across the hips. The day was going to be hot and humid; already I could feel a private atmosphere condensing around me like a plastic bag. Maybe I should have worn a sleeveless dress too.

‘She got me in the hall,’ I said. ‘About the smoke.’

‘The old bitch,’ said Ainsley. ‘Why can’t she mind her own business?’ Ainsley doesn’t come from a small town as I do, so she’s not as used to people being snoopy; on the other hand she’s not as afraid of it either. She has no idea about the consequences.

‘She’s not that old,’ I said, glancing over at the curtained windows of the house; though I knew she couldn’t hear us. ‘Besides, it wasn’t her who noticed the smoke, it was the child. She was at a meeting.’

‘Probably the W.C.T.U.,’ Ainsley said. ‘Or the I.O.D.E. I’ll bet she wasn’t at a meeting at all; she was hiding behind that damn velvet curtain, wanting us to think she was at a meeting so we’d *really* do something. What she wants is an orgy.’

‘Now Ainsley,’ I said, ‘you’re being paranoid.’ Ainsley is convinced that the lady down below comes upstairs when we aren’t there and looks round our apartment and is silently horrified, and even suspects her of ruminating over our mail, though not of going so far as to open it. It’s a fact that she sometimes answers the front door for our visitors before they ring the bell. She must think she’s within her rights to take precautions: when we first considered renting the apartment she made it clear to us, by discreet allusions to previous tenants, that whatever happened the child’s innocence must not be corrupted, and that two young ladies were surely more to be depended upon than two young men.

‘I’m doing my best,’ she had said, sighing and shaking her head. She had intimated that her husband, whose portrait in oils hung above the piano, had not left as much money as he should have. ‘Of course you realize your apartment has no private entrance?’ She had been stressing the drawbacks rather than the advantages, almost as though she didn’t want us to rent. I said we did realize it; Ainsley said nothing. We had

agreed I would do the talking and Ainsley would sit and look innocent, something she can do very well when she wants to – she has a pink-and-white blunt baby’s face, a bump for a nose, and large blue eyes she can make as round as ping-pong balls. On this occasion I had even got her to wear gloves.

The lady down below shook her head again. ‘If it weren’t for the child,’ she said, ‘I would sell the house. But I want the child to grow up in a good district.’

I said I understood, and she said that of course the district wasn’t as good as it used to be: some of the larger houses were too expensive to keep up and the owners had been forced to sell them to immigrants (the corners of her mouth turned gently down) who had divided them up into rooming houses. ‘But that hasn’t reached our street yet,’ she said. ‘And I tell the child exactly which streets she can walk on and which she can’t.’ I said I thought that was wise. She had seemed much easier to deal with before we had signed the lease. And the rent was so low, and the house was so close to the bus stop. For this city it was a real find.

‘Besides,’ I added to Ainsley, ‘they have a right to be worried about the smoke. What if the house was on fire? And she’s never mentioned the other things.’

‘What other things? We’ve never *done* any other things.’

‘Well . . .’ I said. I suspected the lady down below had taken note of all the bottle-shaped objects we had carried upstairs, though I tried my best to disguise them as groceries. It was true she had never specifically forbidden us to do anything – that would be too crude a violation of her law of nuance – but this only makes me feel I am actually forbidden to do everything.

‘On still nights,’ said Ainsley as the bus drew up, ‘I can hear her burrowing through the woodwork.’

We didn’t talk on the bus; I don’t like talking on buses, I would rather look at the advertisements. Besides, Ainsley and I



don't have much in common except the lady down below. I've only known her since just before we moved in: she was a friend of a friend, looking for a room-mate at the same time I was, which is the way these things are usually done. Maybe I should have tried a computer; though on the whole it's worked out fairly well. We get along by a symbiotic adjustment of habits and with a minimum of that pale-mauve hostility you often find among women. Our apartment is never exactly clean, but we keep it from gathering more than a fine plum-bloom of dust by an unspoken agreement: if I do the breakfast dishes, Ainsley does the supper ones; if I sweep the living-room floor, Ainsley wipes the kitchen table. It's a see-saw arrangement and we both know that if one beat is missed the whole thing will collapse. Of course we each have our own bedroom and what goes on in there is strictly the owner's concern. For instance Ainsley's floor is covered by a treacherous muskeg of used clothes with ashtrays scattered here and there on it like stepping-stones, but though I consider it a fire-hazard I never speak to her about it. By such mutual refrainings – I assume they are mutual since there must be things I do that she doesn't like – we manage to preserve a reasonably frictionless equilibrium.

We reached the subway station, where I bought a package of peanuts. I was beginning to feel hungry already. I offered some to Ainsley, but she refused, so I ate them all on the way downtown.

We got off at the second-last stop south and walked a block together; our office buildings are in the same district.

'By the way,' said Ainsley as I was turning off at my street, 'have you got three dollars? We're out of scotch.' I rummaged in my purse and handed over, not without a sense of injustice: we split the cost but rarely the contents. At the age of ten I wrote a temperance essay for a United Church Sunday-school competition, illustrating it with pictures of car-crashes, diagrams of

diseased livers, and charts showing the effects of alcohol upon the circulatory system; I expect that's why I can never take a second drink without a mental image of a warning sign printed in coloured crayons and connected with the taste of tepid communion grapejuice. This puts me at a disadvantage with Peter; he likes me to try and keep up with him.

As I hurried towards my office building, I found myself envying Ainsley her job. Though mine was better-paying and more interesting, hers was more temporary: she had an idea of what she wanted to do next. She could work in a shiny new air-conditioned office-building, whereas mine was dingy brick with small windows. Also, her job was unusual. When she meets people at parties they are always surprised when she tells them she's a tester of defective electric toothbrushes, and she always says, 'What else do you do with a B.A. these days?' Whereas my kind of job is only to be expected. I was thinking too that really I was better equipped to handle her job than she is. From what I see around the apartment, I'm sure I have much more mechanical ability than Ainsley.

By the time I finally reached the office I was three-quarters of an hour late. None commented but all took note.