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The Year of the Flood

Written by Margaret Atwood

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MARGARET
ATWOOD

THE
YEAR
OF THE
FLOOD



virago

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Toby

Year Twenty-Five, the Year of the Flood

In the early morning Toby climbs up to the rooftop to watch the sunrise. She uses a mop handle for balance: the elevator stopped working some time ago and the back stairs are slick with damp, and if she slips and topples there won't be anyone to pick her up.

As the first heat hits, mist rises from among the swath of trees between her and the derelict city. The air smells faintly of burning, a smell of caramel and tar and rancid barbecues, and the ashy but greasy smell of a garbage-dump fire after it's been raining. The abandoned towers in the distance are like the coral of an ancient reef – bleached and colourless, devoid of life.

There still is life, however. Birds chirp; sparrows, they must be. Their small voices are clear and sharp, nails on glass: there's no longer any sound of traffic to drown them out. Do they notice that quietness, the absence of motors? If so, are they happier? Toby has no idea. Unlike some of the other Gardeners – the more wild-eyed or possibly overdosed ones – she has never been under the illusion that she can converse with birds.

The sun brightens in the east, reddening the blue-grey haze that marks the distant ocean. The vultures roosting on hydro poles fan out their wings to dry them, opening themselves like black umbrellas. One and then another lifts off on the thermals and spirals upwards. If they plummet suddenly, it means they've spotted carrion.

Vultures are our friends, the Gardeners used to teach. *They purify the earth. They are God's necessary dark Angels of bodily dissolution. Imagine how terrible it would be if there were no death!*

Do I still believe this? Toby wonders.

Everything is different up close.

The rooftop has some planters, their ornamentals running wild; it has a few fake-wood benches. There was once a sun canopy for cocktail hour, but that's been blown away. Toby sits on one of the benches to survey the grounds. She lifts her binoculars, scanning from left to right. The driveway, with its lumirose borders, untidy now as frayed hairbrushes, their purple glow fading in the strengthening light. The western entrance, done in pink adobe-style solarskin, the snarl of tangled cars outside the gate.

The flower beds, choked with sow thistle and burdock, enormous aqua kudzu moths fluttering above them. The fountains, their scallop-shell basins filled with stagnant rainwater. The parking lot with a pink golf cart and two pink AnooYoo Spa minivans, each with its winking-eye logo. There's a fourth minivan farther along the drive, crashed into a tree: there used to be an arm hanging out of the window, but it's gone now.

The wide lawns have grown up, tall weeds. There are low irregular mounds beneath the milkweed and fleabane and sorrel, with here and there a swatch of fabric, a glint of bone.

That's where the people fell, the ones who'd been running or staggering across the lawn. Toby had watched from the roof, crouched behind one of the planters, but she hadn't watched for long. Some of those people had called for help, as if they'd known she was there. But how could she have helped?

The swimming pool has a mottled blanket of algae. Already there are frogs. The herons and the egrets and the peagrets hunt them, at the shallow end. For a while Toby tried to scoop out the small animals that had blundered in and drowned. The luminous green rabbits, the rats, the rakunks, with their striped tails and raccoon bandit masks. But now she leaves them alone. Maybe they'll generate fish, somehow. When the pool is more like a swamp.

Is she thinking of eating these theoretical future fish? Surely not.

Surely not yet.

She turns to the dark encircling wall of trees and vines and fronds and shrubby undergrowth, probing it with her binoculars. It's from there that any danger might come. But what kind of danger? She can't imagine.

In the night there are the usual noises: the faraway barking of dogs, the tittering of mice, the water-pipe notes of the crickets, the occasional grumph of a frog. The blood rushing in her ears: *katoush, katoush, katoush*. A heavy broom sweeping dry leaves.

"Go to sleep," she says out loud. But she never sleeps well, not since she's been alone in this building. Sometimes she hears voices – human voices, calling to her in pain. Or the voices of women, the women who used to work here, the anxious women who used to come, for rest and rejuvenation.

Splashing in the pool, strolling on the lawns. All the pink voices, soothed and soothing.

Or the voices of the Gardeners, murmuring or singing; or the children laughing together, up on the Edencliff Garden. Adam One, and Nuala, and Burt. Old Pilar, surrounded by her bees. And Zeb. If any one of them is still alive, it must be Zeb: any day now he'll come walking along the roadway or appear from among the trees.

But he must be dead by now. It's better to think so. Not to waste hope.

There must be someone else left, though; she can't be the only one on the planet. There must be others. But friends or foes? If she sees one, how to tell?

She's prepared. The doors are locked, the windows barred. But even such barriers are no guarantee: every hollow space invites invasion.

Even when she sleeps, she's listening, as animals do – for a break in the pattern, for an unknown sound, for a silence opening like a crack in rock.

When the small creatures hush their singing, said Adam One, it's because they're afraid. You must listen for the sound of their fear.