

# MARGARET ATWOOD



# STONE MATTRESS

B L O O M S B U R Y

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*Nine Tales*

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MARGARET ATWOOD

B L O O M S B U R Y  
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

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## ALPHINLAND

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The freezing rain sifts down, handfuls of shining rice thrown by some unseen celebrant. Wherever it hits, it crystallizes into a granulated coating of ice. Under the streetlights it looks so beautiful: like fairy silver, thinks Constance. But then, she would think that; she's far too prone to enchantment. The beauty is an illusion, and also a warning: there's a dark side to beauty, as with poisonous butterflies. She ought to be considering the dangers, the hazards, the grief this ice storm is going to bring to many; is already bringing, according to the television news.

The TV screen is a flat high-definition one that Ewan bought so he could watch hockey and football games on it. Constance would rather have the old fuzzy one back, with its strangely orange people and its habit of rippling and fading: there are some things that do not fare well in high definition. She resents the pores, the wrinkles, the nose hairs, the impossibly whitened teeth shoved right up in front of your eyes so you can't ignore them the way you would in real life. It's like being forced to act as someone else's bathroom mirror, the magnifying kind: seldom a happy experience, those mirrors.

Luckily, on the weather show the personnel stand well back. They have their maps to attend to, their broad hand gestures, like those of waiters in glamorous films of the '30s or magicians about to reveal the floating lady. Behold! Gigantic swaths of whiteness plume across the continent! Just look at the extent of it!

Now the show moves outside. Two young commentators – a boy, a girl, both of them wearing stylish black parkas with halos of pale fur around their faces – hunch under dripping umbrellas as cars grind slowly past them, windshield wipers labouring. They're excited; they say they've never seen anything like it. Of course they haven't, they're too young. Next there are shots of calamities: a multiple car-crash pileup, a fallen tree that's bashed off part of a house, a snarl of electrical wires dragged down by the weight of the ice and flickering balefully, a row of sleet-covered planes stranded in an airport, a huge truck that's jackknifed and tipped over and is lying on its side with smoke coming out. An ambulance is on the scene, a fire truck, a huddle of raingear-clad operatives: someone's been injured, always a sight to make the heart beat faster. A policeman appears, crystals of ice whitening his moustache; he pleads sternly with people to stay inside. *It's no joke*, he tells the viewers. *Don't think you can brave the elements!* His frowning, frosted eyebrows are noble, like those on the wartime bond-drive posters from the 1940s. Constance remembers those, or believes she does. But she may just be remembering history books or museum displays or documentary films: so hard, sometimes, to tag those memories accurately.

Finally, a minor touch of pathos: a stray dog is displayed, semi-frozen, wrapped in a child's pink nap blanket. A gelid baby would have been better, but for lack of one the dog will do. The two young commentators make *Aw cute* faces; the girl pats the dog, which wags its sodden tail feebly. "Lucky guy," says the boy. This could be you, it's implied, if you don't behave yourself, only you wouldn't get rescued. The boy turns to the camera and solemnifies his face, even though it's clear he's having the time of his life. There's more to come, he says, because the main part of the storm hasn't even hit! It's worse in Chicago, as it so often is. Stay tuned!

Constance turns off the TV. She crosses the room, dims the lamp, then sits beside the front window, staring out into the streetlight-illuminated darkness, watching the world turn to diamonds – branches, rooftops, hydro lines, all glittering and sparkling.

"Alphinland," she says out loud.

"You'll need salt," says Ewan, right in her ear. The first time he spoke to her it startled and even alarmed her – Ewan having been no longer in a tangibly living condition for at least four days – but now she's more relaxed about him, unpredictable though he is. It's wonderful to hear his voice, even if she can't depend on having any sort of a conversation with him. His interventions tend to be one-sided: if she answers him, he doesn't often answer back. But it was always more or less like that between them.

She hadn't known what to do with his clothes, afterwards. At first she left them hanging in the closet, but it was too upsetting to open the door and see the jackets and suits ranged on their hangers, waiting mutely for Ewan's body to be slipped inside them so they could be taken for a walk. The tweeds, the woollen sweaters, the plaid work shirts . . . She couldn't give them away to the poor, which would have been the sensible thing. She couldn't throw them out: that would have been not only wasteful but too abrupt, like ripping off a bandage. So she'd folded them up and stored them away in a trunk on the third floor, with mothballs.

That's fine in the daytimes. Ewan doesn't seem to mind, and his voice, when it turns up, is firm and cheerful. A striding voice, showing the way. An extended index-finger voice, pointing. *Go here, buy this, do that!* A slightly mocking voice, teasing, making light: that was often his manner towards her before he became ill.

At night, however, things get more complex. There have been bad dreams: sobbing from inside the trunk, mournful complaints, pleas to be let out. Strange men appearing at the front door who hold out promises of being Ewan, but who are not. Instead they're menacing, with black trench coats. They demand some garbled thing that Constance can't make out, or, worse, they insist on seeing Ewan, shouldering their way past her, their intentions clearly murderous. "Ewan's not home," she'll plead, despite the muted cries for help coming from the trunk on the third floor. As they begin to tromple up the stairs, she wakes up.

She's considered sleeping pills, though she knows they're addictive and lead to insomnia. Maybe she ought to sell the house and move to a condo. That notion was being pushed at the time of the funeral by the boys, who are not boys any more and who live in cities in New Zealand and France, too conveniently far for them to visit her much. They'd been backed up in spades by their brisk but tactful and professionally accomplished wives, the plastic surgeon and the chartered accountant, so it was four against one. But Constance stood firm. She can't abandon the house,

because Ewan is in it. Though she'd been smart enough not to tell them about that. They've always thought she was slightly borderline anyway because of Alphinland, though once such an enterprise makes a lot of money the whiff of nuttiness around it tends to evaporate.

*Condo* is a euphemism for retirement home. Constance doesn't hold it against them: they want what is best for her, not merely what is simplest for them, and they were understandably perturbed by the disorder they'd witnessed, both in Constance – though they'd made allowances because she was in the throes of mourning – and in, just for example, her refrigerator. There were items in that refrigerator for which there was no sane explanation. *What a swamp*, she could hear them thinking. *Awash in botulism, a wonder she hasn't made herself seriously ill.* But of course she hadn't, because she wasn't eating much in those final days. Soda crackers, cheese slices, peanut butter straight from the jar.

The wives had dealt with the situation in the kindest way. "Do you want this? What about this?" "No, no," Constance had wailed. "I don't want any of it! Throw it all out!" The three little grandchildren, two girls and a boy, had been sent on a sort of Easter egg hunt, searching for the half-drunk cups of tea and cocoa that Constance had left here and there around the house and that were now covered with grey or pale-green skins in various stages of growth. "Look, Maman! I found another one!" "Ew, that's gross!" "Where is Grandpa?"

A retirement home would provide company for her, at least. And it would take away the burden from her, the responsibility, because a house like hers needs upkeep, it needs attention, and why should she be saddled with all those chores any more? That was the idea set forth in some detail by the daughters-in-law. Constance could take up bridge-playing, or Scrabble, they suggested. Or backgammon, said to be popular again. Nothing too stressful or exciting to the brain. Some mild communal game.

"Not yet," says Ewan's voice. "You don't need to do that yet."

Constance knows this voice isn't real. She knows Ewan is dead. Of course she knows that! Other people – other recently bereaved people – have had the same experience, or close. Aural hallucination, it's called. She's read about it. It's normal. She isn't crazy.

"You're not crazy," Ewan says comfortingly. He can be so tender when he thinks she's having some anguish.

He's right about the salt. She ought to have stocked up on some form of ice melt earlier in the week but she forgot, and now if she doesn't get some, she'll be a prisoner inside her own house because the street will be a skating rink by tomorrow. What if the layer of ice doesn't melt for days and days? She could run out of food. She could become one of those statistics – old recluse, hypothermia, starvation – because, as Ewan has pointed out before now, she can't live on air.

She'll have to venture out. Even one bag of salt mix will be enough to do the steps and the walk and keep other people from killing themselves, much less herself. The corner store is her best bet: it's only two blocks away. She'll have to take her two-wheeled shopping bag, which is red and also waterproof, because the salt will be heavy. It was only Ewan who drove their car; her own licence lapsed decades ago

because once she got so deeply involved in Alphinland she felt she was too distracted to drive. Alphinland requires a lot of thought. It excludes peripheral details, such as stop signs.

It must be quite slippery out there already. If she tries this escapade, she might break her neck. She stands in the kitchen, dithering. “Ewan, what should I do?” she says.

“Pull yourself together,” Ewan says firmly. Which isn’t very instructive, but which was his habitual way of responding to a question when he didn’t want to be pinned down. *Where’ve you been, I was so worried, did you have an accident? Pull yourself together. Do you really love me? Pull yourself together. Are you having an affair?*

After some rummaging, she finds a large zip-lock freezer bag in the kitchen, dumps out the three shrivelled, whiskery carrots inside it, and fills it with ashes from the fireplace, using the little brass fireplace shovel. She hasn’t lit a fire since Ewan ceased to be present in visible form, because it didn’t seem right. Lighting a fire is an act of renewal, of beginning, and she doesn’t want to begin, she wants to continue. No: she wants to go back.

There’s still a stack of wood and some kindling; there are still a couple of partially burnt logs in the grate from the last fire they had together. Ewan was lying on the sofa with a glass of that disgusting chocolate nutrient drink beside him; he was bald, due to the chemo and the radiation. She tucked the plaid car rug around him and sat beside him, holding his hand, with the tears running silently down her cheeks and her head turned away so he couldn’t see. He didn’t need to be distressed by her distress.

“This is nice,” he’d managed to say. It was hard for him to talk: his voice was so thin, like the rest of him. But that isn’t the voice he has now. The voice he has now is back to normal: it’s his voice of twenty years ago, deep and resonant, especially when he laughs.

She puts on her coat and boots, finds her mittens and one of her woolly hats. Money, she’ll need some of that. House keys: it would be stupid to lock herself out and be turned into a frozen lump right on her own doorstep. When she’s at the front door with the wheeled shopping bag, Ewan says to her, “Take the flashlight,” so she trudges upstairs to the bedroom in her boots. The flashlight is on the nightstand on his side of the bed; she adds it to her purse. Ewan is so good at planning ahead. She herself never would have thought of a flashlight. The front porch steps are sheer ice already. She sprinkles ashes on them from the zip-lock, then stuffs the bag into her pocket and proceeds down crabwise, one step at a time, holding on to the railing and hauling the wheeled shopper behind her with the other hand, bump bump bump. Once on the sidewalk, she opens the umbrella, but that’s not going to work – she can’t manage those two objects at once – so she closes it again. She’ll use it as a cane. She inches out onto the street – it’s not as icy as the sidewalk – and teeters along the middle of it, balancing herself with the umbrella. There aren’t any cars, so at least she won’t get run over.

On the especially sheer parts of the road she sprinkles more of the ashes, leaving a faint black trail. Perhaps she’ll be able to follow it home, if push comes to shove. It’s the kind of thing that might occur in Alphinland – a trail of black ashes, mysterious, alluring, like glowing white stones in a forest, or bread crumbs – only there would be

something extra about those ashes. Something you'd need to know about them, some verse or phrase to pronounce in order to keep their no doubt malevolent power at bay. Nothing about dust to dust, however; nothing involving last rites. More like a sort of runic charm.

"Ashes, bashes, crashes, dashes, gnashes, mashes, splashes," she says out loud as she picks her way over the ice. Quite a few words rhyme with *ashes*. She'll have to incorporate the ashes into the storyline, or one of the storylines: Alphinland is multiple in that respect. Milzreth of the Red Hand is the most likely provenance for those spellbinding ashes, being a warped and devious bully. He likes to delude travellers with mind-altering visions, lure them off the true path, lock them into iron cages or shackle them to the wall with gold chains, then pester them, using Hairy Hank-Imps and Cyanoreens and Firepiggles and whatnot. He likes to watch as their clothing – their silken robes, their embroidered vestments, their fur-lined capes, their shining veils – are ripped to shreds, and they plead and writhe attractively. She can work on the intricacies of all that when she gets back to the house.

Milzreth has the face of a former boss of hers when she worked as a waitress. He was a rump-slapper. She wonders if he ever read the series.

Now she's reached the end of the first block. This outing was maybe not such a good idea: her face is streaming wet, her hands are freezing, and meltwater is dribbling down her neck. But she's underway now, she needs to see it through. She breathes in the cold air; pellets of blown ice whip against her face. The wind's getting up, as the TV said it would. Nonetheless there's something brisk about being out in the storm, something energizing: it whisks away the cobwebs, it makes you inhale.

The corner store is open 24/7, a fact that she and Ewan have appreciated ever since they moved to this area twenty years ago. There are no sacks of ice melt stacked outside where they usually are, however. She goes inside, trundling her two-wheeled shopping bag.

"Is there any salt left?" she asks the woman behind the counter. It's someone new. Constance has never seen her before; there's a high turnover here. Ewan used to say the place had to be a money-laundering joint because they couldn't possibly be making a profit, considering the low traffic and the state of their lettuces.

"No, dear," the woman says. "There was a run on it earlier. Be prepared, I guess is what they had in mind." The implication is that Constance has failed to be prepared, which in fact is true. It's a lifelong failing: she has never been prepared. But how can you have a sense of wonder if you're prepared for everything? Prepared for the sunset. Prepared for the moonrise. Prepared for the ice storm. What a flat existence that would be.

"Oh," says Constance. "No salt. Bad luck for me."

"You shouldn't be out in this, dear," the woman says. "It's treacherous!" Although she has dyed red hair shaved up the back of her neck in an edgy style, she's only about ten years younger than Constance by the look of her, and quite a lot fatter. At least I don't wheeze, thinks Constance. Still, she likes being called *dear*. She was called that when very much younger, then not called it for a long time. Now it's a word she hears frequently.

"It's all right," she says. "I only live a couple of blocks away."

"Couple of blocks is a long way to go in this weather," says the woman, who despite

her age has a tattoo peeking up above her collar. It looks like a dragon, or a version of one. Spikes, horns, bulgy eyes. “You could freeze your ass off.”

Constance agrees with her, and asks if she can park her shopping bag and umbrella beside the counter. Then she wanders up and down the aisles, pushing a wire store cart. There are no other customers, though in one aisle she encounters a weedy young man transferring cans of tomato juice to a shelf. She picks up one of the barbecued chickens that revolve on spits inside a glass case, day in and day out like a vision from the Inferno, and a package of frozen peas.

“Kitty litter,” says Ewan’s voice. Is this a comment on her purchases? He disapproved of those chickens – he said they were probably full of chemicals – though he’d eat one readily enough if she brought it home, back in his eating days.

“What do you mean?” she says. “We don’t have a cat any more.” She’s discovered that she has to talk out loud to Ewan because most of the time he can’t read her mind. Though sometimes he can. His powers are intermittent.

Ewan doesn’t expand – he’s such a tease, he often makes her figure out the answers by herself – and then it comes to her: the kitty litter is for the front steps, instead of salt. It won’t work as well, it won’t melt anything, but at least it will provide some traction. She wrestles a bag of the stuff into the cart and adds two candles and a box of wooden matches. There. She’s prepared.

Back at the counter she exchanges pleasantries with the woman about the excellence of the chicken – it’s an item the woman likes herself, because who can be bothered with cooking when there’s only one, or even only two – and stows her purchases in her wheeled shopper, resisting the temptation to get into a conversation about the dragon tattoo. This topic might swiftly veer into complexities, as she’s learned from experience over the years. There are dragons in Alphinland, and they have numerous fans with many bright ideas they are eager to share with Constance. How she ought to have done the dragons differently. How they would do the dragons if it was them. Subspecies of dragons. Errors she has made about the care and feeding of dragons, and so on. It’s astonishing how folks can get so worked up over something that doesn’t exist.

Has the woman overheard her talking to Ewan? Most likely, and most likely it didn’t bother her. Any store that’s open 24/7 must get its share of people who talk to invisible companions. In Alphinland, such behaviour would call for a different interpretation: some of its inhabitants have spirit familiars.

“Where exactly do you live, dear?” the woman calls after her when Constance is halfway out the door. “I could text a friend, get you a walk home.” What sort of friend? Maybe she’s a biker’s girl, thinks Constance. Maybe she’s younger than Constance thought; maybe she’s just very weathered.

Constance pretends she didn’t hear. It could be a ruse, and next thing you know there will be a gang member bent on home invasion standing outside the door with the duct tape ready in his pocket. They say their car has broken down and can they use your phone, and out of the goodness of your heart you let them in, and before you know it you’re duct-taped to the banister and they’re inserting push-pins under your fingernails to make you cough up your passwords. Constance is well informed about that sort of thing: she doesn’t watch the television news for nothing.

The trail of ashes is no use any more – it’s iced over, she can’t even see it – and the

wind is stronger. Should she open the kitty litter bag right here in mid-journey? No, she'll need a knife, or some scissors; although there's usually a pull string. She peers inside the shopper with the flashlight, but the battery must be low because it's too dim in there to see. She could get chilled to the bone struggling with such a bag; better to make a dash for it. Though *dash* is hardly the word.

The ice seems twice as thick as when she started out. The bushes in the front lawn look like fountains, their luminous foliage cascading gracefully to the ground. Here and there a broken tree branch partially blocks the road. Once she's reached her house, Constance leaves the shopper outside on the walk and hauls herself up the slippery steps by clinging to the railing. Happily the porch light is shining, though she can't remember turning it on. She wrestles with the key and the lock, opens the door, and tramps through to the kitchen, shedding water. Then, kitchen scissors in hand, she retraces her route, descends the steps to the red shopper, cuts open the kitty litter bag, and spreads lavishly.

There. Wheeled shopper up the steps, bump bump bump, and into the house. Door locked behind her. Drenched coat off, soaking wet hat and mitts set to steam on the radiator, boots parked in the hall. "Mission accomplished," she says in case Ewan is listening. She wants him to know she got back safely; he might worry otherwise. They'd always left notes for each other, or else messages on the answering machine, back before all the digital gadgets. In her more extreme and lonely moments she's thought of leaving messages on the phone service for Ewan. Maybe he could listen to them through electric particles or magnetic fields, or whatever it is he's using to throw his voice through the airwaves.

But this isn't a lonely moment. It's a better moment: she's feeling pleased with herself for carrying out the salt mission. She's hungry too. She hasn't been this hungry ever since Ewan has failed to be present at meals: eating alone has been too dispiriting. Now, however, she tears off pieces of the broiled chicken with her fingers and wolfs them down. This is what people do in Alphinland when they've been rescued from something – dungeons, moors, iron cages, drifting boats: they eat with their hands. Only the very upper classes have what you'd call cutlery, though just about everyone has a knife, unless they happen to be a talking animal. She licks her fingers, wipes them on the dishtowel. There ought to be paper towels but there aren't.

There's still some milk, so she gulps it down right out of the carton, spilling hardly any. She'll make herself a hot drink later. She's in a hurry to get back to Alphinland because of the trail of ashes. She wants to decipher it, she wants to unravel it, she wants to follow it. She wants to see where it will lead.

Alphinland currently lives on her computer. For many years it unfolded in the attic, which she'd converted to a workspace of sorts for herself once Alphinland had made enough money to pay for the renovation. But even with the new floor and the window they'd punched through, and the air conditioning and the ceiling fan, the attic was small and stuffy, as the top floors of these old brick Victorians are. So after a while – after the boys were in high school – Alphinland had migrated to the kitchen table,

where it unscrolled for several years on an electric typewriter – once considered the height of innovation, now obsolete. The computer was its next location, and not without its hazards – things could disappear from it in an infuriating manner – but they’ve improved the computers over time and she’s become used to hers now. She moved it into Ewan’s study after he was no longer in there in visible form.

She doesn’t say “after his death,” even to herself. She doesn’t use the D-word about him at all. He might overhear it and be hurt or offended, or perhaps confused, or even angry. It’s one of her not-fully-formulated beliefs that Ewan doesn’t realize that he’s dead.

She sits at Ewan’s desk, swathed in Ewan’s black plush bathrobe. Black plush bathrobes for men were cutting edge, when? The ’90s? She’d bought this bathrobe herself, as a Christmas present. Ewan always resisted her attempts to make him cutting edge, not that those attempts had lasted much beyond the bathrobe; she’d run out of interest in how he looked to others.

She wears this bathrobe not for heat but for comfort: it makes her feel that Ewan might still be in the house physically, just around the corner. She hasn’t washed it since he died; she doesn’t want it to smell of laundry detergent instead of Ewan.

*Oh Ewan, she thinks. We had such good times! All gone now. Why so fast?* She wipes her eyes on the black plush sleeve.

“Pull yourself together,” says Ewan. He never likes it when she sniffles.

“Right,” she says. She squares her shoulders, adjusts the cushion on Ewan’s ergonomic desk chair, turns the computer on. The screensaver comes up: it’s a gateway, drawn for her by Ewan, who was a practising architect before he took up the more dependable job of university teaching, though what he taught was not called “Architecture,” it was called “Theory of Constructed Space” and “Human Landscape Creation” and “The Contained Body.” He’d remained very good at drawing, and he’d found an outlet for it in making funny pictures for the children and then the grandchildren. He’d drawn the screensaver for her as a gift, and to show that he took this thing of hers – this thing that was, let’s face it, somewhat embarrassing to him in the more abstract intellectual circles to which he belonged – to show that he took her thing seriously. Or that he took her seriously, both of which she’d had reason to doubt from time to time. Also that he’d pardoned her for Alphinland, for her neglect of him because of it. The way she’d look at him without seeing him.

One of her own ideas is that the screensaver was a repentance gift, making it up to her for something he wouldn’t admit he’d done. That period of emotional absence during which Ewan must have been otherwise occupied – if not physically, then emotionally – with another woman. With another face, another body, another voice, another scent. A wardrobe not hers, with its alien belts and buttons and zippers. Who was that woman? She’d suspect, then be wrong. The shadowy presence laughed at her softly from the sleepless darkness of 3 a.m., then slid away. She couldn’t pin anything down.

All that time she’d felt like an inconvenient block of wood. She’d felt boring, and only half-alive. She’d felt numb.

She’d never pushed him about that interlude, never confronted him. The subject was like the D-word: it was there, it loomed over them like a huge advertising blimp, but to mention it would have been like breaking a spell. It would have been terminal. *Ewan,*

*are you seeing someone else? Pull yourself together. Use your common sense. Why would I need to do that?* He'd have brushed her off, minimized the question.

Constance could think of a lot of reasons why he would need to do that. But she smiled and hugged him, and asked him what he'd like for dinner, and shut up about it.

The screensaver gateway is made of stone, curved in a Roman arch. It's situated midway in a long, high wall that has several turrets on top of it, with red triangular banners flying from them. There's a heavy barred gate, standing open. Beyond is a sunlit landscape, with more turrets poking up in the distance.

Ewan went to some trouble with this gateway. He cross-hatched, he water-coloured; he even added some horses grazing in a faraway field, though he knew better than to fool around with dragons. The picture is very pretty, very William Morris or perhaps more Edward Burne-Jones, but it misses the point. The gateway and the wall are too clean, too new, too well kept up. Although Alphinland has its corners of luxury, its silks and taffetas, its embroideries, its ornate sconces, for the most part it's ancient and dingy and somewhat decrepit. Also it's frequently laid waste, which makes for a lot of ruins.

Over the screensaver gateway is a legend carved in the stone, in pseudo-gothic Pre-Raphaelite lettering: ALPHINLAND.

Constance takes a deep breath. Then she goes through.

On the other side of the gateway there's no sunny landscape. Instead there's a narrow road, almost a trail. It winds downhill to a bridge, which is lit – because it's night – by yellowish lights shaped like eggs or water drops. Beyond the bridge is a dark wood.

She'll cross the bridge and move stealthily through the wood, alert for ambushes, and when she comes out on the other side she'll be at a crossroads. Then it will be a matter of which of the roads to follow. All of them are in Alphinland, but each leads to a different version of it. Even though she's its creator, its puppet mistress, its determining Fate, Constance never knows exactly where she might end up.

She began Alphinland a long time ago, years before she met Ewan. She was living with another man then, in a two-room walk-up with a lumpy mattress on the floor and a shared toilet in the hallway, and an electric kettle (hers) and a hotplate (his) they were not officially supposed to have. There was no refrigerator so they put their food containers out on the windowsill, where the food froze in winter and spoiled in summer, though it wasn't too bad in spring and fall, except for the squirrels.

This man she lived with was one of the poets she used to hang around with under the sweet, youthful belief that she too was a poet. He was called Gavin, an unusual name then, though not unusual now: the Gavins have multiplied. Young Constance felt very lucky to have been taken up by Gavin, who was four years older than she was and knew a lot of other poets, and was lean and ironic and indifferent to the norms of society and grimly satirical, as poets were then. Perhaps they're still like that: Constance is too old to know.

Even to be the object of one of Gavin's ironic or grimly satirical remarks – to the

effect that her hypnotic ass was a much more significant part of Constance than her frankly forgettable poetry, for instance – was obscurely thrilling to her. She was also accorded the privilege of appearing in Gavin’s poems. Not by name, of course: female objects of desire were addressed in poems as “Lady” then, or else as “my truelove,” in a gesture to chivalry and folk songs – but it was enormously seductive for Constance to read Gavin’s more erotic poems and know that every time he wrote *Lady* – or, even better, “my truelove” – it meant her. “My Lady Reclines on a Pillow,” “My Lady’s First Morning Coffee,” and “My Lady Licks My Plate” were heartwarming, but “My Lady Bends Over” was her favourite. Whenever she felt that Gavin was being terse with her, she would get out that poem and reread it.

Along with these literary attractions there was a lot of vigorous and impromptu sex.

Once she’d become linked to Ewan, Constance had known better than to reveal the details of her earlier life. Though what was there to worry about? Although Gavin had been intense, he’d also been a shit; so he was clearly no competition for Ewan, a knight in shining armour by comparison. And that particular early life experience had ended badly, with sorrow and mortification for Constance. So why bring Gavin up? It would have served no purpose. Ewan had never asked her about any other men in her life, so Constance had never told. She certainly hopes Ewan has no access to Gavin now, through her unspoken thoughts or in any other way.

One of the good things about Alphinland is that she can move the more disturbing items from her past through its stone gateway and store them in there on the memory palace model much in use in, when was it? The eighteenth century? You associate the things you want to remember with imaginary rooms, and when you want total recall you go into that room.

Thus she keeps a deserted winery in Alphinland, on the grounds of the stronghold currently held by Zymri of the Adamant Fist – an ally of hers – for the sole purpose of Gavin. And since it’s one of the rules about Alphinland that Ewan has never been allowed through the stone gateway, he’ll never find that winery or discover who she’s got stashed inside it.

So Gavin’s in an oak cask in the winery. He’s not suffering, although objectively he might deserve to suffer. But Constance has worked at forgiving Gavin, so he’s not allowed to be tortured. Instead he’s preserved in a state of suspended animation. Every once in a while she stops by the winery and presents Zymri with a gift intended to cement their alliance – an alabaster jar of honeyed Xnamic urchins, a collar of Cyanoreen claws – and says the charm that unlocks the top of the cask and has a look. Gavin is slumbering peacefully. He was always handsome with his eyes closed. He doesn’t look a day older than the last time she saw him. It still hurts her to remember that day. Then she replaces the top of the cask and says the charm backwards, sealing Gavin inside until she feels like dropping in for another peek at him.

In real life, Gavin won a few prizes for his poetry and then got a tenured position teaching Creative Writing at a university in Manitoba, though since retiring he’s decamped to Victoria, British Columbia, with a lovely view of the Pacific sunset. Constance receives a Christmas card from him every year; actually, from him and his third and much younger wife, Reynolds. Reynolds, what a dumb name! It sounds like a cigarette brand of the ’40s, back when cigarettes took themselves seriously.

Reynolds signs the cards for both of them – Gav and Rey, they go by – and encloses

chirpy, irritating annual letters about their vacations (Morocco! So lucky they'd packed the Imodium! Though, more recently: Florida! So good to be out of the drizzle!). She also sends an annual account of their local Literary Fiction reading group – only *important* books, only *intelligent* books! Right now they're tackling Bolaño, hard work but so worth it if you persist! The club members prepare themed snacks to go with the books they're reading, so Rey is learning to make tortillas, from scratch. Such fun!

Constance suspects that Reynolds takes an unhealthy interest in Gavin's bohemian youth, and most especially in Constance herself. How could she not? Constance had been Gavin's first live-in, at a time in his life when he'd been so horny he could barely keep his jeans zipped when Constance was within half a mile of him. It was as if she radiated a ring of magic particles; as if she cast an irresistible spell, like Pheromonya of the Sapphire Tresses in Aphinland. There's no way Reynolds can compete with that. She probably has to use a sex aid on Gavin, considering his age. If she bothers at all.

"Who are Gavin and Reynolds?" Ewan would say, every year.

"I knew him at college," Constance would reply. It was a partial truth: she had in fact quit college in order to be with Gavin, so entranced had she been by him and the combination of aloofness and avidity. But Ewan would not welcome such a piece of information. It could make him sad, or jealous, or even angry. Why unsettle him?

Gavin's fellow poets – and the folksingers and jazz musicians and actors who were part of an amorphous, ever-shifting group of artistic risk-takers – spent a lot of their time at a coffee house called the Riverboat, in the Yorkville area of Toronto, morphing then from white-bread quasi-slum to cool pre-hippie hangout. Nothing's left of the Riverboat but one of those depressing historical cast-iron signs marking the spot, out in front of the chi-chi hotel that occupies its former space. *Everything will be swept away*, those signs declare, *and a lot sooner than you think*.

None of the poets and folksingers and jazz musicians and actors had a bean, and Constance didn't have a bean either, but she was young enough to find poverty glamorous. La Bohème, that was her. She started writing the Alphinland stories to make enough money to support Gavin, who viewed that kind of support as part of a true love's function. She cranked out those early stories on her rickety manual typewriter, improvising as she went; then she managed – to her own surprise, at first – to sell them, though not for very much money, to one of the subcultural magazines in New York that went in for that brand of cheesy fantasy. People with diaphanous wings on the covers, many-headed animals, bronze helmets and leather jerkins, bows and arrows.

She was good at writing those stories, or good enough for the magazines. As a child she'd had fairytale books with pictures by Arthur Rackham and his peers – gnarled trees, trolls, mystic maidens with flowing robes, swords, baldrics, golden apples of the sun. So Alphinland was just a matter of expanding that landscape, altering the costumes, and making up the names.

She was waiting tables at the time as well, at a place called Snuffy's, named after a hillbilly cartoon character and specializing in corn bread and fried chicken; part of the pay was all the fried chicken you could eat, and Constance used to smuggle out extra

pieces for Gavin and watch with pleasure while he gobbled them down. The job was exhausting and the manager was a leech, though the tips weren't too bad, and you could up your pay packet if you did overtime, like Constance did.

Girls did that then – knocked themselves out to support some man's notion of his own genius. What was Gavin doing to help pay the rent? Not much, though she suspected him of dealing pot on the side. Once in a while they even smoked some of that, though not often, because it made Constance cough. It was all very romantic.

The poets and folksingers made fun of her Alphinland stories, naturally. Why not? She made fun of them herself. The subliterate fiction she was churning out was many decades away from being in any way respectable. There was a small group that confessed to reading *The Lord of the Rings*, though you had to justify it through an interest in Old Norse. But the poets considered Constance's productions to be far below the Tolkien standard, which – to be fair – they were. They'd tease her by saying she was writing about garden gnomes, and she'd laugh and say yes, but today the gnomes had dug up their crock of golden coins and would buy them all a beer. They liked the free beer part of it, and would make toasts: "Here's to the gnomes! Long may they roam! A gnome in every home!"

The poets frowned on writing for money, but Constance was granted an exemption because, unlike their poetry, Alphinland was intended to be commercial trash, and anyway she was doing it for Gavin as a Lady should, and in addition she was not so stupid as to take this drivel seriously.

What they didn't understand was that – increasingly – she did take it seriously. Alphinland was hers alone. It was her refuge, it was her stronghold; it was where she could go when things with Gavin weren't working out. She could walk in spirit through the invisible portal and wander through the darkling forests and over the shimmering fields, making alliances and defeating enemies, and no one else could come in unless she said they could because there was a five-dimensional spell guarding the entranceway.

She started spending more and more time in there, especially after it became semi-evident to her that not every "Lady" in Gavin's new poems referred to her. Unless, that is, he was remarkably confused about the colour of his Lady's eyes, once described as "blue as witches" and/or "distant stars," now said to be of an inky darkness. "My Lady's Ass Is Nothing Like the Moon" was a tribute to Shakespeare – that's what Gavin said. Had he forgotten that there was an earlier poem – a little coarse, but heartfelt – that claimed his Lady's ass *was* like the moon: white, round, softly shining in the dark, alluring? But this other one was tight and muscular; it was active rather than passive, gripping rather than enticing; more like a boa constrictor, though of course not the same shape. With the aid of a hand-held mirror, Constance examined her back view. No way to rationalize it: there was just no comparison. Could it be that when Constance was working her formerly poeticized ass off waiting tables at Snuffy's – which wore her out so much that she wanted sleep more than she wanted sex – Gavin was rolling around on their lumpy mattress with a fresh and sprightly new truelove? One with a gripping ass?

In the past Gavin had always taken a certain pleasure in humiliating Constance in public, with the sardonic, ironic remarks that were one of his poetic specialties: it was a form of compliment, she felt, since it made her the focus of his attention. He was

showing her off in a sense, and since that turned him on, she meekly let the humiliation wash over her. But now he stopped humiliating her. Instead, he was ignoring her, which was much worse. When they were alone in their two rented rooms, he no longer kissed her neck and tore off her clothes and threw her onto their mattress in a flamboyant display of uncontrollable lust. Instead he'd complain of a back spasm, and suggest – more than that, demand – that she compensate for his pain and immobility by giving him a blowjob.

This was not her favourite form of activity. She was unpractised at it, in addition to which there was a long list of other things she would rather put into her mouth.

By contrast, no one in Alphinland ever demanded a blowjob. But then, no one in Alphinland had a toilet either. Toilets weren't necessary. Why waste time on that kind of routine bodily function when there were giant scorpions invading the castle? Alphinland did have bathtubs though, or rather, square pools sunk in jasmine-scented gardens and heated by underground springs. Some of the more depraved Alphinlanders bathed in the blood of their captives, who were chained to stakes around the pool to watch as their life drained slowly away into the scarlet bubbles.

Constance stopped going to the group gatherings at the Riverboat because the others were giving her pitying looks, and also asking leading questions, such as “Where did Gavin get to? He was here just a minute ago.” They knew more than she did. They could see that things were coming to a head.

The new Lady's name turned out to be Marjorie. A name, thinks Constance now, that has all but disappeared: the Marjories are going extinct, and not a moment too soon for her. Marjorie was the dark-haired, dark-eyed, lanky-legged part-time volunteer bookkeeper at the Riverboat, given to vibrant African textiles wound around her waist, and to dangling handmade bead earrings, and to a braying guffaw that suggested a mule with bronchitis.

Or suggested it to Constance; though obviously not to Gavin. Constance walked in on Gavin and Marjorie while they were in full hump, with no back spasm anywhere on view. Wineglasses littered the table, clothes littered the floor, and Marjorie's hair littered the pillow: the pillow of Constance. Gavin had groaned, either in orgasm or in disgust at Constance's bad timing. Marjorie, on the other hand, had brayed, at Constance or Gavin or else the general situation. It was a derisive bray. It was not kindly, and it rankled.

What was left for Constance to say except, *You owe me half the rent?* She never got it, though; Gavin was nothing if not cheap, a feature of the poets then. Shortly after she'd moved out, taking her electric kettle with her, she'd signed her first Alphinland book contract. Once the rumours of her gnome-generated affluence – her comparative affluence – had spread around the Riverboat, Gavin had appeared at her new three-room apartment – an apartment sporting a genuine bed, shared with one of the folksingers, though that didn't last long either – and had tried to make up with her. Marjorie was a fluke, he said. An accident. Nothing serious. It wouldn't happen again. His real truelove was Constance: surely she too realized that they belonged together!

That move was more than tawdry on the part of Gavin, and Constance told him so. Did he have no sense of shame, no honour? Did he grasp what a leech he was, how

lacking in initiative, how selfish? In return for which Gavin, astonished at first by the scrappiness displayed by his erstwhile mild moon-maid, gathered his sarcasm together and told her that she was a flake, that her poems were worthless, that her blowjobs were inept, that her idiotic Alphinland was juvenile pabulum, and that he had more talent in his bumhole than she had in her entire tiny powder-puff of a brain.

So much for *true* and *love*.

But Gavin had never grasped the inner significance of Alphinland. It was a dangerous place, and – granted – preposterous in some ways, but it was not sordid. The denizens of it had standards. They understood gallantry, and courage, and also revenge.

Therefore Marjorie is not stored in the deserted winery where Gavin has been parked. Instead she's immobilized by runic spells inside a stone beehive belonging to Frenosia of the Fragrant Antennae. This demigoddess is eight feet tall and covered with tiny golden hairs, and has compound eyes. Luckily she's a close friend of Constance and is thus happy to assist in her plans and devices in return for the insect-related charms that Constance has the ability to bestow. So every day at twelve noon sharp, Marjorie is stung by a hundred emerald and indigo bees. Their stings are like white-hot needles combined with red-hot chili sauce, and the pain is beyond excruciating.

In the world outside Alphinland, Marjorie parted ways both with Gavin and with the Riverboat, and went to business college, and then became something in an advertising company. So said the grapevine. She was last seen by Constance striding along Bloor Street in a beige power suit with big shoulder pads, during the '80s. That suit was amazingly ugly, and so were the clunky shit-kicking shoes that went with it.

Marjorie didn't see Constance, though. Or she pretended not to. Just as well.

There's an alternate version stashed in Constance's inner filing cabinet, in which Constance and Marjorie recognized each other that day with cries of delight, and went for a coffee, and had a big bray over Gavin and his poems and his yen for blowjobs. But that never happened.

Constance descends the path, crosses the bridge with the dim, egg-shaped lamps, and enters the dark wood. Hush! It's important to go quietly. There's the trail of ashes, up ahead. Now for the charm. Constance types:

*It mashes, it smashes  
And sometimes it gnashes;  
The dread tooth of Time  
Will turn all to ashes.*

But that's a description, she decides; it's not a charm. Something more like an incantation is needed:

*Norg, Smithert, Zurpash,  
Bright Teldarine,  
Let light be seen,*

*Avaunt the evil in this ash.  
By the Mauve Blood of . . .*

The phone rings. It's one of the boys, the one who lives in Paris; or rather, it's his wife. They've seen the ice storm on television, they were concerned about Constance, they wanted to make sure she's all right.

What time is it there? she asks them. What are they doing up so late? Of course she's all right! It's only a little ice! Nothing to get into a twist about. Love to the kids, now you get some sleep. Everything's fine.

She hangs up as quickly as she can: she resents the interruption. Now she's forgotten the name of the god whose Mauve Blood is so efficacious. Luckily, on her computer she has a list of all the Alphinland deities and their attributes and oath words, alphabetized for easy reference. There are a lot of deities by now; they've accumulated over the years, and she had to make up some extra ones for the animated series of a decade ago, and then even more of them – bigger, scarier, with enhanced violence – for the video game they're currently putting the final touches on. If she'd foreseen that Alphinland was going to last so long and be so successful, she would have planned it better. It would have had a shape, a more defined structure; it would have had boundaries. As it is, it's grown like urban sprawl.

Not only that, she wouldn't have called it Aphinland. The name sounds too much like Elfinland, when what she'd really had at the back of her mind was Alph the sacred river, out of the Coleridge poem, with its measureless caverns. That, and Alpha, the first letter of the alphabet. A smart-alecky young interviewer had once asked her if her “constructed world” was called Alphinland because it was so full of alpha males. She'd responded with the slightly fey laugh she'd cultivated for defensive purposes once that smarty-pants kind of journalist had decided she was worth an interview. That was around the time all the books they were now lumping together as genre were getting some attention from the press. Or at least the big sellers were.

“Oh no,” she'd said to him. “I don't think so. Not alpha males. It just sort of happened that way. Maybe . . . I always loved that breakfast cereal. Alpine?”

She comes across as fatuous in every interview she's ever given, which is why she no longer gives them. Nor does she attend conventions any more: she's seen enough kids dressed up like vampires and bunnies and *Star Trek*, and especially like the nastier villains of Alphinland. She really can't bear one more inept impersonation of Milzreth of the Red Hand – yet another apple-cheeked innocent in quest of his inner wickedness.

She also declines to engage in social media, despite her publisher's constant urging. It does no good for them to tell her she'll increase the sales of Alphinland and extend the reach of its franchise. She doesn't need any more money, because what would she use it for? Money had not saved Ewan. She'll leave it all to the boys, as their wives expect her to. And she has no wish to interact with her devoted readers: she knows too much about them already, them and their body piercings and tattoos and dragon fetishes. Above all, she doesn't wish to disappoint them. They'd be expecting a raven-haired sorceress with a snake bracelet on her upper arm and a stiletto hair ornament, instead of a soft-spoken, paper-thin ex-blonde.

She's just opening up the Alphinland file folder on her screen to consult the list of

gods when Ewan's voice says, right in her ear and very loudly, "Turn it off!"

She jumps. "What?" she says. "Turn what off?" Has she left the burner on under the kettle again? But she hasn't made the hot drink!

"Turn it off! Alphinland! Turn it off now!" he says.

He must mean the computer. Shaken, she looks over her shoulder – he was right there! Then she clicks the Shut Down button. Just as the screen darkens, there's a heavy, dull thud, and the lights go off.

All the lights. The streetlights too. How did he know in advance? Does Ewan have prophetic vision? He never used to.

She gropes her way down the stairs and along the hall to the front door, opens it cautiously: to the right, a block along, there's a yellow glow. A tree must have fallen across a hydro line and pulled it down. Heaven only knows when they'll be around to fix it: this outage must be one of thousands.

Where did she leave the flashlight? It's in her purse, which is in the kitchen. She shuffles and gropes her way along the hall, fumbles in her purse. Not much juice left in the flashlight batteries, but enough so she manages to get the two candles lit.

"Turn the water off at the mains," says Ewan. "You know where that is, I showed you. Then open the faucet in the kitchen. You need to drain the system, you don't want the pipes to burst." This is the longest speech he's made for a while. It gives her a warm, fuzzy feeling: he's genuinely worried about her.

Once she's accomplished the faucet quest, she assembles a collection of insulating items – the duvet from the bed, a pillow, some clean wool socks, and the plaid car rug – and makes a nest in front of the fireplace. Then she gets the fire going. As a precaution, she pulls the fire screen across in front of it: she wouldn't want to go up in flames during the night. There isn't enough wood for a whole day, but there's enough to get her through until dawn without freezing to death. It will surely take hours for the house to cool down. In the morning she'll think about alternatives; perhaps by then the storm will have blown past. She snuffs out the candles: no sense in setting herself alight.

She curls up inside the duvet. In the fireplace the flames flicker. It's surprisingly cozy, at least for now.

"Well done," says Ewan. "That's my gal!"

"Oh Ewan," says Constance. "Am I your gal? Was I always? Were you having an affair, that time?"

No answer.

The trail of ashes leads through the woods, glimmering in the moonlight, the starlight. What has she forgotten? There's something wrong. She comes out from under the trees: she's on an icy street. It's the street where she lives, where she's lived for decades, and there's her house, the house where she lives with Ewan.

It shouldn't be here, in Alphinland. It's in the wrong place. All of it is wrong, but she follows the trail of ashes anyway, up the front steps and in through the door. Sleeves wrap around her, sleeves of black cloth. A trench coat. It isn't Ewan. There's a mouth, pressing against her neck. There's a long-lost taste. She's so tired, she's losing power; she can feel it draining away from her, out through the ends of her fingers.

How did Gavin get in here? Why is he dressed like an undertaker? With a sigh she melts into his arms; wordlessly she falls back onto the floor.

Morning light wakes her, streaming in through the window with its extra pane of ice. The fire has gone out. She's stiff from sleeping on the floor.

What a night. Who would have thought she was capable of having such an intense erotic dream, at her age? And with Gavin: how idiotic. She doesn't even respect him. How did he manage to work his way out of the metaphor she's kept him bottled up in for all these years?

She opens the front door, peers outside. The sun is shining, the eaves are growing bright icicles. The kitty litter on her steps is a mess; as things melt, it will turn to damp clay. The street is a shambles: branches everywhere, ice at least two inches thick. It's glorious.

But the inside of the house is cold, and getting colder. She'll have to go out into all that dazzling space to buy more wood, if there is any. Or else she could find a shelter of some sort: a church, a coffee shop, a restaurant. Some place that still has power and heat.

That would mean leaving Ewan. He'd be alone here. That wouldn't be a good thing.

For breakfast she has vanilla yogurt, spooning it straight from the container. While she's eating it, Ewan announces himself. "Pull yourself together," he says, quite sternly.

She fails to grasp his point. She doesn't need to pull herself together. She's not dithering, she's only eating yogurt. "What do you mean, Ewan?" she says.

"Didn't we have good times?" he says, almost pleading. "Why are you ruining it? Who was that man?" Now his voice sounds hostile.

"Who do you mean?" she says. She has a bad feeling. It can't be possible that Ewan has access to her dreams.

*Constance, she tells herself. You're out of control. Why wouldn't he have access to your dreams? He's only inside your head!*

"You know," says Ewan. His voice comes from behind her. "That man!"

"I don't think you have any right to ask," she says, turning around. No one there.

"Why not?" says Ewan, more faintly. "Pull yourself together!" Is he fading?

"Ewan, did you have an affair?" she asks. If he really wants to get into it, two can play.

"Don't change the subject," he says. "Didn't we have good times?" There's a tinny quality to the voice now: something mechanical.

"You're the one who was always changing the subject," she says. "Just tell me the truth! You have nothing to lose any more, you're dead."

She shouldn't have said that. She's gone about this all wrong, she ought to have reassured him. She shouldn't have used that word, it slipped out because she was angry. "I didn't mean it!" she says. "Ewan, I'm sorry, you're not really . . ."

Too late. There's a tiny, barely audible explosion, like a puff of air. Then silence: Ewan is gone.

She waits: nothing. "Stop sulking!" she says. "Just snap out of it!" She's briefly angry.