The Tent

Margaret Atwood

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Extract

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I

Life Stories

Why the hunger for these? If it is a hunger. Maybe it's more like bossiness. Maybe we just want to be in charge, of the life, no matter who lived it.

It helps if there are photos. No more choices for the people in them – pick this one, dump that one. The livers of the lives in question had their chances, most of which they blew. They should have spotted the photographer in the bushes, they shouldn't have chewed with their mouths open, they shouldn't have worn the strapless top, they shouldn't have yawned, they shouldn't have laughed: so unattractive, the candid denture. *So that's what she looked like*, we say, connecting the snapshot to the year of the torrid affair. *Face like a half-eaten*

pizza, and is that him, gaping down her front? What did he see in her, besides cheap lunch? He was already going bald. What was all the fuss about?

I'm working on my own life story. I don't mean I'm putting it together; no, I'm taking it apart. It's mostly a question of editing. If you'd wanted the narrative line you should have asked earlier, when I still knew everything and was more than willing to tell. That was before I discovered the virtues of scissors, the virtues of matches.

I was born, I would have begun, once. But snip, snip, away go mother and father, white ribbons of paper blown by the wind, with grandparents tossed out for good measure. *I spent my childhood*. Enough of that as well. Goodbye dirty little dresses, goodbye scuffed shoes that caused me such anguish, goodbye well-thumbed tears and scabby knees, and sadness worn at the edges.

Adolescence can be discarded too, with its salty tanned skin, its fecklessness and bad romance and leakages of seasonal blood. What was it like to breathe so heavily, as if drugged, while rubbing up against strange leather coats in alleyways? I can't remember.

Once you get started it's fun. So much free space opens up. Rip, crumple, up in flames, out the window.

I was born, I grew up, I studied, I loved, I married, I procreated, *I said, I wrote*, all gone now. *I went, I saw, I did*. Farewell crumbling turrets of historic interest, farewell icebergs and war monuments, all those young stone men with eyes upturned, and risky voyages teeming with germs, and dubious hotels, and doorways opening both in and out. Farewell friends and lovers, you've slipped from view, erased, defaced: I know you once had hairdos and told jokes, but I can't recall them. Into the ground with you, my tender fur-brained cats and dogs, and horses and mice as well: I adored you, dozens of you, but what were your names?

I'm getting somewhere now, I'm feeling lighter. I'm coming unstuck from scrapbooks, from albums, from diaries and journals, from space, from time. Only a paragraph left, only a sentence or two, only a whisper.

I was born.

I was.

I.

Clothing Dreams

Oh no. Not this again. It's the clothing dream. I've been having it for fifty years. Aisle after aisle, closetful after closetful, metal rack after metal rack of clothing, stretching into the distance under the glare of the fluorescent tubing—as gaudy and ornate and confusing, and finally as glum and oppressive, as the dreams of a long-time opium smoker. Why am I compelled to riffle through these outfits, tangling up the hangers, tripping on the ribbons, snagging myself on a hook or button while feathers and sequins and fake pearls drop to the floor like ants from a burning tree? What is the occasion? Who do I need to impress?

THE TENT

There's a smell of stale underarms. Everything's been worn before. Nothing fits. Too small, too big, too magenta. These flounces, hoops, ruffles, wired collars, cut-velvet capes – none of these disguises is mine. How old am I in this dream? Do I have tits? Whose life am I living? Whose life am I failing to live?

Bottle

— I only want to be like everyone else, I said.
— You're not, though, was what he told me. You're not like them.
— Why not? I said. I was inclined to listen to him. He had a persuasive manner.
— Because I love you.
— Is that all?
— I'm not just anyone, he said.
— Nobody is, I said.
— You see, he said, that's what I mean, you're not like everyone else. You notice the details, you take the distinguishing characteristics into account, you pick out the tendencies. These are the qualities I'm looking for.

— Is this a seduction? I said.

— No. The seduction took place a while ago; you didn't even notice it. We're past that. We're at the hiring stage. We've come to the bargaining.

— What do I have to do? I said.

— Sleep with me, that goes without saying. I'll make it worth your while.

— What else?

— I value loyalty. Remember, you're not a lawyer: don't fuck the clients.

— I wouldn't anyway. They always have bad karma. What else?

— Just what you're already doing, he said. Some routine chores. Inhale some smoke, chew selected plant materials, tell a couple of riddles, write things on leaves. Do the odd incantation; lead a few sightseeing tours of hell. Keep up the tone of the establishment.

— No fooling around with snakes? I can't, if there's snakes. I have a phobia.

— Snakes were last year.

— Good. Where do I sign? Just a minute — what do I get in return?

— Women are so mercenary.

— No, but seriously?

— You'll get wise. Wiser than you are, I mean.

— It's not enough.

— All right: you can have some immortality. Here it is. It's inside this bottle. See it?

— That little heap of dust?

— Look harder.

— Oh. Yes. Does it always sparkle like that?

— Only at first.

— Are you sure this is immortality?

— Trust me. With some of this, you'll always have a voice.

— Have a voice, or *be* a voice?

— One or the other.

— Well, okay, thanks a lot then.

— Don't drop the bottle. Be careful with it. You have to watch those things, they have a habit of getting bigger. They can get as big as the sky. You can be sucked into them before you know it. It's the vacuum effect. Now set it down, over there in the corner, dump that bulky mantle, and put your arms . . .

— I feel dizzy. This is getting a little intense. I ate too much at lunch. I think I should go home and lie down.

— Lie down right here! You owe me, remember? No time like the present. Slit a throat, pour a libation, empty your mind, close your eyes, clear a space for me, think about caves . . .

– Ouch. Let go! I need to breathe. I can't, right now. How about next week?

– Don't you love me?

– It's not that. It's just – are you really who you say you are?

– I am what I am. I'm also who you say I am. That's the way it is with gods, and I'm a god, after all.

– So there's nothing to you. You're only in my head. You're just a – you're nothing.

– More or less.

– That's what I thought. Wait, come back!

– I'm not stupid, I recognize *no* when I hear it.

– I didn't mean to be abrupt. Let's talk.

– You can't talk with nothing.

– But –

Impenetrable Forest

The person you have in mind is lost. That's the picture I'm getting. He believes he is lost in the middle of an impenetrable forest. His head is full of trees. Branches he's bumping into. Brambles he's tangled up in. Paths that lead nowhere. Animals that jeer at him and run away. Here and there the glimpse of an elusive maiden, wearing a dress of what appears to be white cheesecloth. I'm getting some insects too, the stinging variety. This is not pleasant. The sun is sinking. The shadows are darkening. Things could hardly be worse.

Then there's you. Where do you come into it? You're not one to resist an opportunity, the sort of opportunity he presents. Some would call it meddling, but you think



of it as helpfulness. I apologize for being so frank but I'm just the messenger. Here you come, descending in our pinkish cloud, glowing like a low-wattage light bulb or an aquarium in a chintzy bar. Feathers sprout from your shoulders, rays of light shoot out from you, silver-and-gold confetti wafts down from you like metallic dandruff. It does not occur to you that your dress is covered with tiny fish hooks. On some of them scraps of bait are still hanging: cricket wings, worm torsos, old bank deposit slips.

There there, you say. A whisk here, a flick there, with your magic wand – transparent plastic, with a miniature motorcar in it that slides up and down in a sparkly fluid when shaken – and the brambles vanish. The sun reverses direction, the paths straighten out, dawn occurs.

Voilà! you say. Your debts are paid, your emotional problems are solved, your illnesses are cured. Not only that, but your childhood sorrows – the ones that held you back and bogged you down – they've been erased. Now you can get on with it.

He looks at you without gratitude. What is this *it* I'm supposed to be getting on with? he says.

You don't know? you ask, with an irritation you try to conceal. I've come down into this stupid woodlot, gone

to major trouble, cleared away a lifetime of junk for you, and you still don't know?

You don't understand much, he says. Why do you think I was lost in the impenetrable forest in the first place?