

# The Love Monster

MISSY MARSTON



ESPLANADE  
*Books*

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## *Prologue*

### Nothing will ever be the same

AFTER YOU NOTICE THE FIRST wrinkle or grey hair, after your husband or wife or child leaves forever, after you have been abducted by aliens, nothing will ever be the same. Everyone knows this. Everything will fall apart, will come undone, will break ranks and head for the hills.

After a heart attack, a car accident, a hurricane, murder or suicide, nothing will ever be the same. Things break into so many pieces you wonder how it all fit together in the first place. And you know damn well it will not be put back together.

After the house burns down, after the crop is blighted, after the train jumps the tracks and goes tearing up the turf, when you find yourself standing alone, staring at the smouldering twisted wreckage, you have to build something new. A Frankenstein version of yourself, your life. A crazy nasty silly monster puppet. It will not be pretty. It is not what you had planned. But if you are lucky, it will be a big strong brute. A big strong brute full of sweet monster love. And live, pumping blood.

That's what this story is about.



One



## Margaret Atwood and the sad decline

HER NAME IS MARGARET ATWOOD. That's right. She is no relation, bears no resemblance, has no literary ambitions; she simply bears the same damn good name. She has explained all these things to shop clerks and bank tellers and office nurses throughout her adult life. Yet they persist.

In fact, her name is Margaret H. Atwood, but don't ask her about the *H*. Really. Never ask.

Margaret H. Atwood is thirty-five. She is thirty-five years old and she can feel herself getting thicker around the middle. She feels thick around the middle like an old battle-axe, the kind that bustles around in a fat column of tight wool skirt-suit. Recently, she has done an inventory and found the following to be true. Her eyes are much less surprised-looking than they once were; they are getting hooded and bored-looking. There is the faintest hint of jowl at her jaw line, a barely perceptible crinkling between her breasts. Most disconcerting of all, there is a single, recurring whisker in the middle of her chin. She has pulled it out, with increasing rage, ten times. She will pull it out again, goddamn it.

This realization – that every single part of her, no matter what course of action she takes, will get uglier over time, that the process is inevitable and unstoppable – has been crushing. She understands that to be concerned with such things may be viewed as superficial, that it may somehow be a betrayal of the sisterhood of women, a giving in to the tyranny of 'prescribed beauty' and so on. And so forth. She understands that some would argue that aging is beautiful. She has seen the smarmy television commercial in which the serene voice-over claims to *want* laugh lines. *Growing old is good* is the tagline. It makes her want to kick the television until it all goes away.

Margaret understands, too, that to complain about these things is to risk the outrage of all those who are older than her, those who may be looking wistfully at their thirties (or forties or fifties) in the

way she is now looking back at her twenties. She sympathizes. She maintains, however, that a person must be allowed a moment of fury when this terrible truth first settles in, when it first becomes evident that no one will stay the same forever, that every single person will sink and wrinkle and shift and undo. It seems to her unspeakably sad.

And, yes, she knows that both those older than her and those younger than her may find her concerns trivial, laughable. This does not help, does not lend perspective. It does not make her laugh.

She concedes that her unseemly and unforeseen fretting over the physical, over this decaying, disposable human suit we all wear is unforgivably vain. She knows that, in this way and several others, she is very likely a bad person. Her heart is surely very small.

## The smaller and faster the heart, the shorter the lifespan

ALSO, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, she will die. Not immediately, but eventually. This is not news, really. Not news exactly but a preposterous giggle-inducing rumour that gains grim credence with time. Time that accelerates, gains mass and hurtles forward through space. Someone once told Margaret that every year is shorter than the last. She finds this, alarmingly, to be true.

It must also be true that many before her who have had the luxury to think such thoughts have thought them and have found a way through. They have picked themselves up, dusted themselves off and trudged or skipped at steadily increasing speed toward death. She wonders, really, how much she cares about death if she is honest. Is death so bad? Might it be a relief? Likely not. Likely it is nothing at all and probably it is just fine. Obviously: nobody knows. But everybody knows what aging is. Aging is what takes a perfectly nice-looking young woman and turns her into Ed Fucking Asner.

Margaret is not considering any kind of plastic surgery, injection or peel. She is not even considering going to the gym. In truth she does not want to be younger. She would not go back in time at gunpoint. It has seemed, with the exception of a few (admittedly large) glitches, that every step away from childhood has been a step in the right direction. She is simply allowing this revelation about decay, descent and death to inform her decision making.

Now that she is alone, now that Brian is out of her hair and she has time on her hands, she is giving the whole matter a serious thinking-through.

She is reminded often of a nature documentary she once watched on television that related lifespan to the heart rate and size of animals. The theory went that all creatures (with hearts) were allotted roughly the same number of heartbeats and, barring the many possible intervening disasters that can end a life, when they reach the magic number (say 273 million) their life will be



over. The machine will have run its course. The variety of natural lifespans could, therefore, be attributed to the various sizes and speeds of hearts: the tiny mile-a-minute heart of a mouse might use up its allotment of beats before lunch time, while the elephant's giant heart will squeeze out a single, massive drumbeat sometime between now and next Tuesday, if it so chooses.

Margaret, a mid-sized animal, wonders what number she is on, how many beats are behind her and how many are ahead. She remembers that Neil Armstrong is rumoured to have had, in his prime, the slowest recorded heart rate of any healthy adult human. Though his title is disputed. Apparently, in the seventies, a yogi named Satyamurti stopped his heart for seven full days.

Seven days. One week. Not one single heartbeat. Or so the story goes.

Satyamurti allowed himself to be hooked up to an ECG, buried himself in a pit in the ground and, through deep meditation, slowed his breathing until the machine registered no heartbeat at all. A straight line dragged across seven days of paper, spooling out onto the ground. Witnesses were understandably concerned. They were certain he was dead. But his disciples would allow no interference, would not dig him up until the exercise was finished and, about half an hour before the yogi was scheduled to be exhumed, the machine stuttered into motion, tracing the familiar skyline of a regular human heartbeat.

When the pit was opened, the yogi smiled up at them, cold and thin and stiff, not only presumably having won some kind of bet, but likely having added a week to his very peculiar life.

It seems absolutely reasonable to Margaret that Neil Armstrong would have a slow heartbeat, fine figure of a man that he is. Everybody knows that astronauts are subjected to rigorous physical training. It is also possible, she thinks, that the heart would not have to work quite so hard at pumping blood when released from gravity, as an astronaut would be now and again. In any event, Mr. Armstrong must be close to eighty years old now and seems to be doing just fine. He and his slow heart seem, from all appearances, to have

many happy years ahead of them.

The yogi is less convincing. Margaret imagines him giggling to himself in the dark as he peels the electrodes off his chest and sticks them to the dirt floor.

Even if she could believe that it were possible, to take control and slow her heart down enough to make some kind of difference in the length of her so-called life, would she bother? Probably not.

Besides, neither the astronaut nor the yogi seems like a reasonable role model. She doubts she is cut out for either lifestyle.

So, go ahead, Heart, run your course.

Come whenever you want, Death, I'm not going anywhere.

## Going anywhere

HE KNEW HOW TO PICK his moments, she'll give him that. A regular Tuesday night, 11:30 p.m., Margaret's eyes were burning with fatigue, her head pounding. She had been so close – her teeth brushed, wearing what passed for pyjamas these days (a large, only slightly stained t-shirt, a pair of shorts), padding toward the marital bed – when she had been apprehended. Brian had taken her hand and led her to the living room; he had put his hands on her shoulders and pushed down until her baggy, old shorts touched the couch.

Margaret stares at her husband while he searches for words.

“Brian, *what?* What is it?”

Brian turns his back to her, puts his face in his hands. The lights are too bright in the living room, the shadows stark. The absurd thought crosses Margaret's mind that she wishes she looked better, that she were at least wearing a bra. Her knees are starting to tremble.

Still looking away, he says, “You know I love you.”

She wants to stop him. She raises her hands, palms toward him, turns her head to the side.

“It just isn't fair. It isn't fair to you, Margaret.”

“Brian, don't.” She is getting up from the couch now, shaking her head, walking toward the bedroom.

“Margaret, I'm sorry.”

She is stopped now, looking at her bare feet. She does not want to hear another word. But out they come, no less a knife in the heart, no less devastating for being as hackneyed as any words could possibly be: “I'm in love with someone else.”

Bastard. It doesn't even sound like he means it. It sounds rehearsed and hollow.

Margaret heads for the bedroom, not wanting to talk, not wanting to catch his eye with hers. She is afraid she will slap him. She wants to kill him with her bare hands.

“I'm serious, Margaret.” He is walking after her. “Margaret, be reasonable.”

She hates being spoken to like this, like a child. She stops and turns. He looks annoyed and indulgent at the same time; it makes for a singularly unbecoming facial expression in her opinion. She wants so badly to stop him from speaking, to stop him from *being*. She is so tired of him. How did they do it? They have quietly grown to hate each other while loving each other and saying neither thing out loud for so long.

And now it is ruined. Now he is leaving and she can't wait for him to go. He is staring at her, reddening, waiting for something to be said.

“Fuck it. I'm just going to go now.”

She trails him as he leaves the bedroom and walks through the living room to the front hall closet where he produces, like a rabbit from a hat, an already-packed suitcase. She thinks, I will never be able to open that closet again without remembering this moment, that stupid suitcase, this sickening night.

And then it hits her: she will not be able to continue living in this house. She knows what will happen after he leaves. This place will feel like exactly what it is: their house with him gone. She knows that she will feel every sad day and every sad night and every sad argument seeping up from the upholstery, pouring down the walls, pooling at the bottom of every stupid coffee cup they own. If someone is leaving, it will have to be her. She needs to bust a move.

“No, *I'm* leaving,” she says. “I hate it here.”

As Brian stands by the door, not sure what to do next, she tears out of the living room and back to the bedroom as though a flag had dropped, the starting pistol fired. She begins to cry and cry and pack things. Anything. The wrong things thrown wrongly into the wrong bags. Uncapped deodorant among the underpants, a pillowcase mistaken for a shirt. She makes a grab for the clock on the bedside table and knocks it onto the floor. *Fuck you, clock.*

Margaret drops onto the bed, defeated. She reaches for Brian's pillow and lifts it to her face. She can smell his hair, his skin. She gathers the fabric of the pillowcase into her hands and breathes him in.

Then she gives her nose a good, hard blow.

Smoothing out the fabric, she returns the besmirched pillow to its spot on Brian's side of the bed and heads to the closet for another suitcase. There you go, Brian, she thinks, sleep tight.

Back in the hallway, Brian is listening to the rummaging and sniffing in the bedroom. He can't believe his luck – he has delivered his news without having to endure too much hysteria and he will not have to move out of the house. Who would have guessed? He returns his suitcase to the closet and opens the front door, closing it behind him as quietly as he can. He will come back when the coast is clear. There is something he needs to attend to anyway.

He needs to see a man about a horse.

If you know what I mean.

## The button factory

MARGARET WORKS IN THE communications department of a large insurance company, checking documents. That is her job – checker. Naturally, this is not a real title. The job is called ‘Senior Editor.’ But she has no illusions: checking is her game.

Checking that each document looks just right and exactly the same as its many brothers and sisters, checking that all punctuation is correct, that all things make sense in their bland way. Checking margins and font sizes, dates and places and the spelling of names. The pamphlets, booklets and press releases she checks are intended to show the world the good work that is being done here at the Company. (Years ago, Margaret had begun to call it ‘the button factory’ inside her head and when speaking to select friends. She is not sure why, but it makes her laugh every time.) She is impressed by the fact that, after having read hundreds, maybe thousands of these documents over the past ten years, she has never come across anything that could possibly be interesting to anyone.

To be honest, insurance seems like the dumbest thing in the world to Margaret, like some kind of institutionalized gambling where the dealer almost always wins.

But hey, buttons aren’t for everybody.

At the button factory, Margaret hates absolutely everyone. She hates everyone, every day, with a great big smile on her face. She especially hates people who are married, who have children, and who love their dogs. People who love their cats, their gerbils, their rats. Whatever. People and their boring lives. They talk and talk about nothing. It can be taxing, holding her work and co-workers in utter contempt for eight hours every day, but given the relatively generous size of the paycheque and the fact of her newly singled income, she thinks she can probably keep it going for several more years. The truth is that she doesn’t mind the work that much: she is left alone to do orderly things that she finds oddly satisfying. And,

frankly, she can't imagine what else she would do.

In her student days, she had had some grander idea of who she would be, studying philosophy (of all things), but it had been a very foggy kind of concept. If she is honest, she supposes that she had thought she would have some devastatingly interesting part-time job (Fashion designer! Television writer! Monkey trainer!) and a wealthy, charming husband who would manage the details of their lovely life. But, no. It was not her destiny. Margaret is only the checker and only at the button factory. And her husband, now in the arms of another, has only ever had limited wealth and diminishing charm.

## Rabbit heart

DAY AFTER DAY MARGARET has arrived at her sad, little office at the button factory to spend the day checking and every evening she has gone home to her new small apartment. How unexpected, to be living alone in her own apartment at the age of thirty-five! She could not have predicted it.

The first weeks, strangely, had been splendid. After the cramped heat of living with someone so disgruntled, so utterly at odds with her, the apartment had felt expansive and cool. She breathed deeply, striding from room to room, making adjustments – fluffing up pillows, straightening pictures. Everything was new! New coffee and tea in new canisters on the kitchen counter, bright white sheets on her own bouncy bed, towels still bearing the creases from being folded and stacked in the store. Every evening she had let the sun go down without turning any lights on. She let darkness and quiet fall on the apartment. She would sit on the couch thinking nothing, being perfectly still. No music playing, no television blaring. Her breath was slow, her eyes closed. She was down in the pit with Yogi Satyamurti, after all.

Margaret had found giving up (partial) home ownership to be an enormous relief. She was no longer on high alert for dripping taps, the whiff of gas, unidentifiable ticking noises in the walls or pipes or vents. The sounds of a giant, unforeseen cash leak. She has given her home repairs over to a higher power: The Landlord.

Weekends, she has spent buying things that her ex, Brian, would have hated: a boxy, black couch for the living room, a massive, ornate, gold-framed mirror for the hallway. But the task that has given her the most pleasure has been seeking out and purchasing – at garage sales, flea markets, thrift stores – the ugliest and silliest decorative plates ever made and hanging them in a sort of gallery on her kitchen wall. There is one with the crew of Star Trek in their bright tunics, the Milky Way glittering in the black sky behind them; one with a dragon serving tea to a little boy in the woods.



Kittens playing chess, Jesus playing baseball and – her favourite – the Legends of Wrestling collector’s plate. The neon-green plate features eight meaty, orange wrestlers in their trademark costumes (kilts, executioner’s hoods, leopard-spotted underwear and so on), *holding hands*.

Glaring out from the plate, looking tough, holding hands with their pals.

It had seemed to Margaret that the place was coming together. Walls were painted, curtains were hung. She had found herself singing as she worked and loving the sound of her voice echoing through the apartment. She had thought that everything was just fine. Until one day.

One Saturday afternoon, she is surveying her living room, admiring the just-hung pictures, when she finds herself filled with pain and wonder, thinking of him. Brian. How happy they had been to find each other so many years ago. How perfectly sweet his face had seemed to her, how she had loved everything about him. She loved the shape of his fingernails and the hair on his arms and his soft, plump earlobes. Her small heart hurts. It is fluttering, racing like a tiny rabbit heart. She is squandering heart beats, leaking life-force as she bends slowly to the ground. She is on her knees and she presses her forehead into the carpet. She waits to throw up or to cry, but this will come later.

For now, she will stay here in this prayer position, quietly breathing, hoping to disappear.

## How perfectly sweet his face

WHEN MARGARET MET BRIAN, she believed in love, was burning with the possibility of it. Her experiences with dating had, to that point, been madly various. She had come face to face with the phantasmagoria of teenage-boy ardour: its clumsy fumbling, relentless goading, stinging cruelty; its infuriating shyness and pure, non-stop, fun-loving enthusiasm. And she was still game. She believed there were greater things ahead. She had left home for school convinced that she would know true love the minute she saw it and that it would be enchanting in a way that no other human could possibly understand. And it would not come from her home town.

In early adolescence Margaret had consumed mass quantities of girl-detective books, which invariably featured – along with the mystery – a chaste romance between the spunky heroine and some clever and polite boy. These romances unfailingly culminated with hand-holding and the presentation of a heart-shaped locket or an engraved bracelet and a tearful goodbye: summer camp or the ski vacation or the stay at the farm had ended. She had pictured these boys as kind of girly and big-eyed, with neat feathered hair in the style of Shaun Cassidy or Andy Gibb. A boy like that would smell like soap and be nice to your parents and giggle with you like one of your girlfriends. You would never feel nervous or embarrassed around a boy like that. She read *Teen Beat* magazine and cut out pictures and listened to records and dreamed of their existence.

Meanwhile, in the school yard, boys smelled like bananas and salami. They would chase girls until they fell over, rub snow in their faces, pinch them hard. This kind of thing could make Margaret cry with rage and press her legs together with excitement at the same time. It made her feel embarrassed and weak and spiteful. The thought of kissing a real boy made her feel sick to her stomach.

She would, as one might expect, overcome her aversion. Her tastes would turn from girl-detective books to trashy vampire stories,

from the Bay City Rollers to the Sex Pistols.

Boys would start to look and smell delicious.

Like men.

Margaret remembers the day – the very second – she fell in love with Brian. She had noticed him in several of her classes, noticed that in each one he had managed to secure the seat directly behind her. She had made a decision to sit in the very front row, determined to like university ten times more than she had liked high school and to show her professors that she was not afraid to be called upon, even when she had no idea what was going on and was likely to make a complete fool of herself. She was ready to be wrong and to learn. She was, to be honest, a bit cocky. No doubt, she was also a bit tiresome. But she was eager. In those first years away from home she walked around with the feeling that she was on the verge of every huge thing – of adult life, of understanding the world and herself in a new, earth-shattering way – and she felt certain that she was on the verge of discovering a great, lifelong love.

Margaret had noticed Brian but had not given him much serious thought. She knew his name, knew his style of question in class. (His questions were always pointed, but prefaced with what she felt were falsely modest disclaimers. “I could be wrong, but ...” or “Maybe I have misunderstood, but ...”) She knew what he looked like. He was tall and skinny and messy, folded into the chair behind hers. There were holes in most of his clothing – his jeans, his shirts, his shoes and, as she would find out later, even his socks and underwear.

She knew he was a wiseass and she had decided to disregard him entirely.

On the day in question, she was already seated, waiting for the other students to get settled, for the professor to arrive, for the adventure to begin. Her cheek was resting on her palm, her elbow on her desk, when Brian reached forward, closed his hand around her wrist and turned her watch toward him to check the time. She could feel the skin tighten over her whole body and when

she turned – half-affronted, half-wide-open with hope – to look at him, he smiled the most beautiful and suggestive smile. And that was the second she knew with a confidence never again repeated, that she was in love with Brian.

She took a moment to really look at him. His eyes were bright and blue and full of ridiculous ideas. He had the shadow of a beard on his jaw. Dark, possibly filthy hair rose in perfectly coiled springs from his head.

“What,” she asked, “are you doing?” She had wanted to deliver this with some edge, some *hauteur*, but could not stop herself from grinning. Giggling like an idiot girl.

“Checking the time.” This was whispered directly into her ear as the professor entered the room and class was launched. Her face burned red hot and she could hear a hum like mosquitoes in her ears. So there it was. The beginning of great love, exactly as she had expected it to be: immediately recognizable, far from home and hotter than Hades.