

Extract from *Moral Disorder* by Margaret Atwood

The Bad News

It's morning. For now, night is over. It's time for the bad news. I think of the bad news as a huge bird, with the wings of a crow and the face of my Grade Four schoolteacher, sparse bun, rancid teeth, wrinkly frown, pursed mouth and all, sailing around the world under cover of darkness, pleased to be the bearer of ill tidings, carrying a basket of rotten eggs, and knowing - as the sun comes up - exactly where to drop them. On me, for one.

At our place, the bad news arrives in the form of the bad-news paper. Tig brings it up the stairs. Tig's real name is Gilbert. It's impossible to explain nicknames to speakers of foreign languages, not that I have to do this much.

'They just killed the leader of the interim governing council,' Tig announces. It's not that he's impervious to bad news: on the contrary. He's angular, he has less body fat than I do and therefore less capacity to absorb, to cushion, to turn the calories of bad news - and it does have calories, it raises your blood pressure - into the substance of his own body. I can do that, he can't. He wants to pass the bad news on as soon possible - get it off his hands, like a hot potato. Bad news burns him.

I'm still in bed. I'm not really awake. I was doing a little wallowing. I was enjoying this morning until now. 'Not before breakfast,' I say. I do not add, 'You know I can't handle it this early in the day.' I've added that before; it's had only an intermittent effect. After this long together, both of our heads are filled with such minor admonitions, helpful hints about the other person - likes and dislikes, preferences and taboos. Don't come up behind me when I'm reading. Don't use my kitchen knives. Don't just strew things. Each believes the other should respect this frequently reiterated set of how-to instructions, but they cancel each other out: if Tig must respect my need to wallow mindlessly, free of bad news, before the first cup of coffee, shouldn't I respect his need to spew out catastrophe so he himself will be rid of it?

'Oh. Sorry,' he says. He shoots me a reproachful look. Why must I disappoint him like this? Don't I know that if he can't tell the bad news, to me, right now, some bilious green bad-news gland or bladder inside him will burst and he'll get peritonitis of the soul? Then I'll be sorry.

He's right, I would be sorry. I'd have no one left whose mind I can read.

'I'm getting up now,' I say, hoping I sound comforting. 'I'll be right down.'

'Now' and 'right down' don't have the same meaning they used to have. Everything takes longer than it did back then. But I can still get through the routine, out of the nightdress, into the day dress, the doing-up of the shoes,

the lubrication of the face, the selection of the vitamin pills. The leader, I think. The interim governing council. Killed by *them*. A year from now I won't remember which leader, which interim governing council, which them. But such items multiply. Everything is interim, no one can govern any more, and there are lots of them, of them. They always want to kill the leaders. With the best of intentions, or so they claim. The leaders have the best of intentions as well. The leaders stand in the spotlight, the killers aim from the dark; it's easy to score.