

## Zooming in on Fear and Desire

As the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* deepens, the relationship between Offred and the Commander remains at the center of it all. On pages 254-255, I have begun to understand much more closely what their time together means to each other, and how in many ways, their fears and desires have become deeply intertwined.

This particular section of the book starts in the bathroom of a hotel room inside of the club, where Offred is stalling while the Commander waits for her in the other room. She begins by worrying that Serena Joy might find out about her whereabouts, in turn revealing her relationship with the Commander. "I must be back at the house before midnight; otherwise I'll turn into a pumpkin, or was that the coach?" While voicing her concerns, she makes a comparison between her situation and Cinderella, a Disney princess. Although ironic, seeing as Gilead is quite the opposite of a fairytale, this juxtaposition holds some similarities. Offred and Cinderella were both at the bottom of the social hierarchy and had an exciting, eye-opening night out with clear consequences.

With the pressure of the Commander expecting her, the bathroom serves as a place of avoidance for Offred. She makes one more comment before stepping out into the hotel room, warning herself: "I must beware of inertia" When I initially read this passage, I completely ignored this line. Looking back at it now, I realize that it says a lot about her hesitancy in having sex outside of the Ceremony. Offred understands the potential it has to deepen their relationship, and sees how it might cause an innocent desire to snowball into something dangerous. By drawing a parallel between the concept of inertia, where an object in motion stays in motion, to her relationship with the Commander, she makes a poignant observation about the risks of an innately human need for love and affection.

As I read this excerpt, I began to sense an underlying tone of fear from Offred's perspective. It was clear that she was scared of the consequences that she might face if anyone were to find out about her and the Commander, because she shared her concerns about this outwardly in her narration. What this excerpt highlights is a deeper rooted fear, one that Offred has only begun to come to terms with: a fear of the Commander himself. This sense of unease is portrayed when Offred remarks rather plainly: "The fact is that I don't want to be alone with him, not on a bed. I'd rather have Serena there too. I'd rather play Scrabble." This attention from the Commander is clearly unwanted, and marks a dark shift in their once playful dynamic. As a reader, it was sickening to see Offred finally muster the confidence to be sure in what she wanted, but be forced against her will to do the opposite. It was less uncomfortable to read similar intimate scenes when she felt indifferent about the way she was being treated, because the outcome had less bearing on her emotional state. Multiple times throughout the passage, Offred had to go so far as to tell herself that her fears were unfounded, in order to make herself feel less violated. This is clear when she says: "I remind myself that he is not an unkind man; that, under other circumstances, I even like him" She later adds: "He is not a monster, I think." Despite her desires to not have sex with the Commander, she knows that ultimately, it is not her choice. This truth was devastating for me to realize.

Part of what initially attracted Offred to the Commander was his power. He had access

to the black market, opening up a whole new world for her to experience, and their meetings were a good way to break up the monotony of everyday life as a Handmaid. As this particular scene unfolds, and the Commander begins to undress, Offred makes a compelling observation about the symbolism of his clothes upon asking: "Will this be worse, to have him denuded, of all his cloth power?" By inquiring about this, Offred points out the fragility of the Commander's power. This jarring shift in perspective made me question the substance of his role as Commander. The way Offred describes him is rather revealing, and suggests that his power only amounted to the clothes he wore. When she metaphorically stripped him of all of the things that made him the Commander, it forced me as the reader to see him for what he truly is: just a man.