

Of course, the two friends are eventually separated and thus cutoff from such intimacy. In her new life as a handmaid, Offred combats her loneliness by seeking out companionship wherever she can, and even by constructing companions from her own imagination. She lingers in the kitchen with Rita and Cora, fantasizing about commiserating with them and participating in the underground information network that constitutes the Martha's own form of resistance against isolation (10-11). She takes heart in the fact that the Offred who came before her carved a secret message on the bedroom wardrobe, presumably as a way of reaching out to her across time. By imagining that she is communing with this other handmaid, and by merging the unknown woman with Moira in her mind (52), Offred creates a surrogate for her lost friend, thus defying the forces that seek to alienate them from each other. Similarly,

Offred uses her capacity

for storytelling as a way of creating companions for herself. She knows no one is physically present to hear her story, yet through the very act of arranging her experience into a narrative, she creates her own listener, reflecting, "I believe you're there, I believe you into being. . . . I tell, therefore you are" (268). For Offred, communicating with this imaginary companion is linked to the hope of escape. As she tells the listener, "I want you to hear [my story], as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in . . . some other place" (268).

In the final chapters of the novel, the primary companion relationship is that between Offred and Nick. Though their relationship differs from the previous examples of companionship due to its sexual nature, their interactions echo some of these earlier examples in important ways. The intimacy shared by Offred and Nick is forbidden, and the two meet in secret at night, just as the inmates at the Red Center exchange forbidden words and touches in the dark.

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