

**From the novel *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood**

The novel *Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood is a **Bildungsroman** (a coming of age story) which focuses on the psychological and moral growth of a **protagonist** (main character) from youth to adulthood. This excerpt from early in the novel focuses on Elaine (the narrator and protagonist) and her relationship with her "friends" Cordelia, Carol, and Grace.

**Chapter 35**

It's the middle of March. In the schoolroom windows the Easter tulips are beginning to bloom. There's still snow on the ground, a dirty filigree, though the winter is losing its hardness and glitter. The sky thickens, sinks lower.

We walk home under the low thick sky that is gray and bulging with dampness. Moist soft flakes are falling out of it, piling up on roofs and branches, sliding off now and then to hit with a wet cottony *thunk*. There's no wind and the sound is muffled by the snow.

It isn't cold. I undo the ties on my blue knitted wool hat, let it flap loose on my head. Cordelia takes off her mittens and scoops up snowballs, throwing them at trees, at telephone poles, at random. It's one of her friendly days; she puts her arm through my arm, her other arm through Grace's, and we march along the street, singing *We don't stop for anybody*. I sing this too. Together we hop and slide.

Some of the euphoria I once felt in falling snow comes back to me; I want to open my mouth and let the snow fall into it. I allow myself to laugh, like the others, trying it out. My laughter is a performance, a grab at the ordinary.

Cordelia throws herself backward onto a blank front lawn, spreads her arms out in the snow, raises them above her head, draws them down to her sides, making a snow angel. The flakes fall onto her face, into her laughing mouth, melting, clinging to her eyebrows. She blinks, closing her eyes against the snow. For a moment she looks like someone I don't know, a stranger, shining with unknown, good possibilities. Or else a victim of a traffic accident, flung onto the snow.

She opens her eyes and reaches up her hands, which are damp and reddened, and we pull her upward so she won't disturb the image she's made. The snow angel has feathery wings and a tiny pin head. Where her hands stopped, down near her sides, are the imprints of her fingers, like little claws.

We've forgotten the time, it's getting dark. We run along the street that leads to the wooden footbridge. Even Grace runs, lumpily, calling, "Wait up!" For once she is the one left behind.

Cordelia reaches the hill first and runs down it. She tries to slide but the snow is too soft, not icy enough, and there are cinders and pieces of gravel in it. She falls down and rolls. We think she's done it on purpose, the way she made the snow angel. We rush down upon her, exhilarated, breathless, laughing, just as she's picking herself up.

We stop laughing, because now we can see that her fall was an accident, she didn't do it on purpose. She likes everything she does to be done on purpose.

Carol says, "Did you hurt yourself?" Her voice is quavery, she's frightened, already she can tell that this is serious. Cordelia doesn't answer. Her face is hard again, her eyes baleful.

Grace moves so that she's beside Cordelia, slightly behind her. From there she smiles at me, her tight smile.

Cordelia says, to me, "Were you laughing?" I think she means, was I laughing at her because she fell down.

"No," I say.

"She was," says Grace neutrally. Carol shifts to the side of the path, away from me.

"I'm going to give you one more chance," says Cordelia. "Were you laughing?"

"Yes," I say, "but..."

"Just yes or no," says Cordelia.

I say nothing. Cordelia glances over at Grace, as if looking for approval. She sighs, an exaggerated sigh, like a grown-up's. "Lying again," she says. "What are we going to do with you?"

We seem to have been standing there for a long time. It's colder now. Cordelia reaches out and pulls off my knitted hat. She marches the rest of the way down the hill and onto the bridge and hesitates for a moment. Then she walks over to the railing and throws my hat down into the ravine. Then the white oval of her face turns up toward me. "Come here," she says.

Nothing has changed, then. Time will go on, in the same way, endlessly. My laughter was unreal after all, merely a gasp for air.

I walk down to where Cordelia stands by the railing, the snow not crunching but giving way under my feet like cotton wool packing. It sounds like a cavity being filled, in a tooth, inside my head. Usually I'm afraid to go so near the edge of the bridge, but this time I'm not. I don't feel anything as positive as fear.

"There's your stupid hat," says Cordelia; and there it is, far down, still blue against the white snow, even in the dimming light. "Why don't you go down and get it?"

I look at her. She wants me to go down into the ravine where the bad men are, where we're never supposed to go. It occurs to me that I may not. What will she do then?

I can see this idea gathering in Cordelia as well. Maybe she's gone too far, hit, finally, some core of resistance in me. If I refuse to do what she says this time, who knows where my defiance will end? The two others have come down the hill and are watching, safely in the middle of the bridge.

"Go on then," she says, more gently, as if she's encouraging me, not ordering. "Then you'll be forgiven."

I don't want to go down there. It's forbidden and dangerous; also it's dark and the hillside will be slippery, I might have trouble climbing up again. But there is my hat. If I go home without it, I'll have to explain, I'll have to tell. And if I refuse to go, what will Cordelia do next? She might get angry, she might never speak to me again. She might push me off the bridge. She's never done anything like that before, never hit or pinched, but now that she's thrown my hat over there's no telling what she might do.

I walk along to the end of the bridge. "When you've got it, count to a hundred," says Cordelia. "Before coming up." She doesn't sound angry any more. She sounds like someone giving instructions for a game.

I start down the steep hillside, holding on to branches and tree trunks. The path isn't even a real path, it's just a place worn by whoever goes up and down here: boys, men. Not girls.

When I'm among the bare trees at the bottom I look up. The bridge railings are silhouetted against the sky. I can see the dark outlines of three heads, watching me.

My blue hat is out on the ice of the creek. I stand in the snow, looking at it. Cordelia is right, it's a stupid hat. I look at it and feel resentment, because this stupid-looking hat is mine, and deserving of ridicule. I don't want to wear it ever again.

I can hear water running somewhere, down under the ice. I step out onto the creek, reach for the hat, pick it up, go through. I'm up to my waist in the creek, slabs of broken ice upended around me.

Cold shoots through me. My overshoes are filling, and the shoes inside them; water drenches my snowpants. Probably I've screamed, or some noise has come out of me, but I can't remember hearing anything. I clutch the hat and look up at the bridge. Nobody is there. They must have walked away, run away. That's why the counting to a hundred: so they could run away.

I try to move my feet. They're very heavy, because of the water inside my boots. If I wanted to I could just keep standing here. It's true dusk now and the snow on the ground is bluish-white. The old tires and pieces of rusted junk in the creek are covered over; all around me are blue arches, blue caves, pure and silent. The water of the creek is cold and peaceful, it comes straight from the cemetery, from the graves and their bones. It's water made from the dead people, dissolved and clear, and I am standing in it. If I don't move soon I will be frozen in the creek. I will be a dead person, peaceful and clear, like them.

I flounder through the water, the edges of the ice breaking off as I step. Walking with waterlogged overshoes is hard; I could slip, and fall all the way in. I grab a tree branch and haul myself up onto the bank and sit down in the blue snow and take off my overshoes and pour out the water. The arms of my jacket are wet to the elbows, my mittens are soaked. Now there are knives going through my legs and hands, and tears running down my face from the pain.

I can see lights along the edges of the ravine, from the houses there, impossibly high up. I don't know how I'm going to up the hill with my hands and feet hurting like this; I don't know how I'm going to get home.

My head is filling with black sawdust; little specks of the darkness are getting in through my eyes. It's as if the snowflakes are black, the way white is black on a negative. The snow has changed to tiny pellets, more like sleet. It makes a rustling noise coming down through the branches, like the shifting and whispering of people in a crowded room who know they must be quiet. It's the dead people, coming up invisible out of the water, gathering around me. *Hush*, is what they say.

I'm lying on my back beside the creek, looking up at the sky. Nothing hurts any more. The sky has a reddish undercolor. The bridge is different-looking; it seems higher above me, more solid, as if the railings have disappeared or been filled in. And it's glowing, there are pools of light along it, greenish-yellow, not like any light I've ever seen before. I sit up to get a better look. My body feels weightless, as it does in water.

There's someone on the bridge, I can see the dark outline. At first I think it's Cordelia, come back for me. Then I see that it's not a child, it's too tall for a child. I can't see the face, there's just a shape. One of the yellowish-green lights is behind it, coming out in rays from around the head.

I know I should get up and walk home, but it seems easier to stay here, in the snow, with the little pellets of ice caressing my face gently. Also I'm very sleepy. I close my eyes.

I hear someone talking to me. It's like a voice calling, only very soft, as if muffled. I'm not sure I've heard it at all. I open my eyes with an effort. The person who was standing on the bridge is moving through the

railing, or melting into it. It's a woman, I can see the long skirt now, or is it a long cloak? She isn't falling, she's coming down toward me as if walking, but there's nothing for her to walk on. I don't have the energy to be frightened. I lie in the snow, watching her with lethargy, and with a sluggish curiosity. I would like to be able to walk on air like that.

Now she's quite close. I can see the white glimmer of her face, the dark scarf or hood around her head, or is it hair? She holds out her arms to me and I feel a surge of happiness. Inside her half-open cloak there's a glimpse of red. It's her heart, I think. It must be her heart, on the outside of her body, glowing like neon, like a coal.

Then I can't see her any more. But I feel her around me, not like arms but like a small wind of warmer air. She's telling me something.

*You can go home now, she says. It will be all right. Go home.*

I don't hear the words out loud, but this is what she says.

### **Chapter 36**

The lights on the top of the bridge are gone. I make my way in the dark, up the hill, sleet rustling around me, hauling myself up by branches and tree trunks, my shoes slipping on the packed icy snow. Nothing hurts, not even my feet, not even my hands. It's like flying. The small wind moves with me, a warm touch against my face.

I know who it is that I've seen. It's the Virgin Mary, there can be no doubt. Even when I was praying I wasn't sure she was real, but now I know she is. Who else could walk on air like that, who else would have a glowing heart? True, there was no blue dress, no crown; her dress looked black. But it was dark. Maybe the crown was there and I couldn't see it. Anyway she could have different clothes, different dresses. None of that matters, because she came to get me. She didn't want me freezing in the snow. She is still with me, invisible, wrapping me in warmth and painlessness, she has heard me after all.

I am up on the main path now; the lights from the houses are nearer, above me, on either side of me. I can hardly keep my eyes open. I'm not even walking straight. But my feet keep on moving, one in front of the other.

Up ahead is the street. As I reach it I see my mother, walking very fast. Her coat isn't done up, she has no scarf on her head, her overshoes flap, half fastened. When she sees me she begins to run. I stop still, watching her running figure with the coat flying out on either side and the unwieldy overshoes, as if she's just some other person I'm watching, someone in a race. She comes up to me under a streetlamp and I see her eyes, large and gleaming with wet, and her hair dusted with sleet. She has no mittens on. She throws her arms around me, and as she does this the Virgin Mary is suddenly gone. Pain and cold shoot back into me. I start to shiver violently.

"I fell in," I say. "I was getting my hat." My voice sounds thick, the words mumbled. Something is wrong with my tongue.

My mother does not say, *Where have you been?* or *Why are you so late?* She says, "Where are your overshoes?" They are down in the ravine, covering over with snow. I have forgotten them, and my hat as well.

"It fell over the bridge," I say. I need to get this lie over with as soon as possible. Telling the truth about Cordelia is still unthinkable for me.

My mother takes off her coat and wraps it around me. Her mouth is tight, her face is frightened and angry at the same time. It's the look she used to have when we would cut ourselves, a long time ago, up north. She puts her arm under my armpit and hurries me along. My feet hurt at every step. I wonder if I will be punished for going down into the ravine.

When we reach the house my mother peels off my soggy half-frozen clothes and puts me into a lukewarm bath. She looks carefully at my fingers and toes, my nose, my ear lobes. "Where were Grace and Cordelia?" she asks me. "Did they see you fall in?"

"No," I say. "They weren't there."

I can tell she's thinking about phoning their mothers no matter what I do, but I am too tired to care. "A lady helped me," I say.

"What lady?" says my mother, but I know better than to tell her. If I say who it really was I won't be believed. "Just a lady," I say.

My mother says I'm lucky I don't have severe frostbite. I know about frostbite: your fingers and toes fall off, as punishment for drink. She feeds me a cup of milky tea and puts me into bed with a hot water bottle and flannelette sheets, and spreads two extra blankets on top. I am still shivering. My father has come home and I hear them talking in low, anxious voices out in the hallway. Then my father comes in and puts his hand on my forehead, and fades to a shadow.

I dream I'm running along the street outside the school. I've done something wrong. It's autumn, the leaves are burning. A lot of people are chasing after me. They're shouting.

An invisible hand takes mine, pulls upward. There are steps into the air and I go up them. No one else can see where the steps are. Now I'm standing in the air, out of reach above the upturned faces. They're still shouting but I can no longer hear them. Their mouths close and open silently, like the mouths of fish.

I am kept home from school for two days. The first day I lie in bed, floating in the glassy delicate clarity of fever. By the second day I am thinking about what happened. I can remember Cordelia throwing my blue knitted hat over the bridge, I remember falling through the ice and then my mother running toward me with her sleety hair. All these things are certain, but in between them there's a hazy space. The dead people and the woman in the cloak are there, but in the same way dreams are. I'm not sure, now, that it really was the Virgin Mary. I believe it but I no longer know it.

I'm given a get-well card with violets on it from Carol, shoved through the letter slot. On the weekend Cordelia calls me on the telephone. "We didn't know you fell in," she says. "We're sorry we didn't wait. We thought you were right behind us." Her voice is careful, precise, rehearsed, unrepentant.

I know she's told some story that conceals what really happened, as I have. I know that this apology has been exacted from her, and that I will be made to pay for it later. But she has never apologized to me before. This apology, however fake, makes me feel not stronger but weaker. I don't know what to say. "It's okay," is what I manage. I think I mean it.

When I go back to school, Cordelia and Grace are polite but distant. Carol is more obviously frightened, or interested. "My mother says you almost froze to death," she whispers as we stand in line, two by two, waiting for the bell. "I got a spanking, with the hairbrush. I really *got* it."

The snow is melting from the lawns; mud reappears on the floors, at school, in the kitchen at home. Cordelia circles me warily. I catch her eyes on me, considering, as we walk home from school. Conversation is artificially normal. We stop at the store for licorice whips, which Carol buys. As we stroll



along, sucking in licorice, Cordelia says, "I think Elaine should be punished for telling on us, don't you?"

"I didn't tell," I say. I no longer feel the sinking in my gut, the held-back tearfulness that such a false accusation would once have produced. My voice is flat, calm, reasonable.

"Don't contradict me," Cordelia says. "Then how come your mother phoned our mothers?"

"Yeah, how come?" says Carol.

"I don't know and I don't care," I say. I'm amazed at myself.

"You're being insolent," says Cordelia. "Wipe that smirk off your face."

I am still a coward, still fearful; none of that has changed. But I turn and walk away from her. It's like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does. I see that I don't have to do what she says, and, worse and better, I've never had to do what she says. I can do what I like.

"Don't you dare walk away on us," Cordelia says behind me. "You get back here right now!" I can hear this for what it is. It's an imitation, it's acting. It's an impersonation, of someone much older. It's a game. There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid. My anger is as much at myself as at them.

"Ten stacks of plates," says Grace. This would once have reduced me. Now I find it silly.

I keep walking. I feel daring, light-headed. They are not my best friends or even my friends. Nothing binds me to them. I am free.

They follow along behind me, making comments on the way I walk, on how I look from behind. If I were to turn I would see them imitating me. "Stuck up! Stuck up!" they cry. I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them. There's something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass. I cross the street and continue along, eating my licorice.

I stop going to Sunday school. I refuse to play with Grace or Cordelia or even Carol after school. I no longer walk home over the bridge, but the long way around, past the cemetery. When they come in a group to the back door to collect me I tell them I'm busy. They try kindness, to lure me back, but I am no longer susceptible to it. I can see the greed in their eyes. It's as if I can see right into them. Why was I unable to do this before?

I spend a lot of time reading comic books in my brother's room when he isn't there. I would like to climb up skyscrapers, fly with a cape, burn holes in metal with my fingertips, wear a mask, see through walls. I would like to hit people, criminals, each fist making a red or yellow light-burst. *Kapow. Krac. Kaboom.* I know that I have the will to do these things. I intend to do them somehow.

At school I make friends with a different girl, whose name is Jill. She is interested in other kinds of games, games of paper and wood. We go to her house and play Old Maid, Snap, Pick Up Sticks. Grace and Cordelia and Carol hang around the edges of my life, enticing, jeering, growing paler and paler every day, less and less substantial. I hardly hear them any more because I hardly listen.