

# MARGE PIERCY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
GONE TO SOLDIERS AND WOMAN ON THE  
EDGE OF TIME

## HE, SHE AND IT

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**He,**

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**Marge Piercy**

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*\*Published by Fawcett Books*

*to the memory of Primo Levi*

His books were important to me.  
I miss his presence in the world.



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# ONE

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## In the Corporate Fortress

Josh, Shira's ex-husband, sat immediately in front of her in the Hall of Domestic Justice as they faced the view screen, awaiting the verdict on the custody of Ari, their son. A bead of sweat slid down the furrow of his spine—he wore a backless business suit, white for the formality of the occasion, very like her own—and it was hard even now to keep from delicately brushing his back with her scarf to dry it. The Yakamura-Stichen dome in the Nebraska desert was conditioned, of course, or they would all be dead, but it was winter now and the temperature was allowed to rise naturally to thirty Celsius in the afternoon as the sun heated the immense dome enclosing the corporate enclave. Her hands were sweating too, but from nervousness. She had grown up in a natural place and retained the ability to endure more heat than most Y-S gruds. She kept telling herself she had nothing to fear, but her stomach was clenched hard and she caught herself licking her lips again and again. Every time she called up time on her internal clock and read it in the corner of her cornea, it was at most a minute later than when last she had evoked it.

The room glittered in black and white marble, higher than wide and engineered to intimidate, Shira knew from her psychoengineering background. Her field was the interface between people and the large artificial intelligences that formed the Base of each corporation and every other information-producing and information-eating entity in the world, as well as the information utility called the Network, which connected everyone. But she had enough psychological background to recognize the intent of the chamber where with their assigned lawyers they sat upright and rigid as tuning forks for the blow that would set them quivering into sound. Perched around them were similar groups in waiting: breaches of marriage contract, custody cases, complaints of noncompliance and abuse, each group staring at the blank view screen. From time to time a face appeared, one of those ideal, surgically created Y-S faces—blond hair, blue eyes with epicanthic folds, painted

brows like Hokusai brush strokes, aquiline nose, dark golden complexion. It would announce a verdict, and then a group would swirl around itself, rise and go, some beaming, some grim-faced, some weeping.

She should not be as frightened as she was. She was a techie like Josh, not a day laborer; she had rights. Her hands incubated damp patches on her thighs. She hoped their verdict would be announced soon. She had to pick up Ari at the midlevel-tech day care center in forty-five minutes, some twenty minutes' glide from the official sector. She did not want him waiting, frightened. He was only two years and five months, and she simply could not make him understand: Don't worry, Mommy may be a little late. It was her fault, insisting on the divorce in December, for ever since, Ari had been skittish; and Josh bitter, furious. Twice as alive. If he had loosed in their marriage the passion her leaving had provoked, they might have had a chance together. He fought her with full energy and intelligence, as she had wanted to be loved.

Everything was her fault. She should never have married Josh. She had been passionately in love only once in her life, too young, and never again; but if she had not married Josh, she would not have had Ari. Oh, she felt guilty all right as she looked at Josh's narrow back, the deep groove of his spine, vulnerable, bent slightly forward as if some chill wind blew only on him. She had promised to love him, she had tried to love him, but the relationship had felt thin and incomplete.

During their courtship, she had thought he was beginning to learn to talk to her, to respond more sensually and directly. In the born-again Shintoism of Y-S, they were both marranos, a term borrowed from the Spanish Jews under the Inquisition who had pretended to be Christian to survive. Y-S followed a form of revivalist Shinto, Shinto grafted with Christian practices such as baptism and confession. Marranos in contemporary usage were Jews who worked for multitis and went to church or mosque, paid lip service and practiced Judaism secretly at home. All multitis had their official religion as part of the corporate culture, and all gruds had to go through the motions. Like Shira, Josh had the habit of lighting candles privately on Friday night, of saying the prayers, of keeping the holidays. It had seemed rational for them to marry. He had been at Y-S for ten years. She had come straight from graduate school, at twenty-three. Y-S had outbid the other multitis for her in Edinburgh—like most of the brightest students in Norika, the area that had been the U.S. and Canada, she had gone to

school in the affluent quadrant of Europa—so she had had no choice but to come here. She had been lonely, unused to the strict and protocol-hedged hierarchy of Y-S. She had grown up in the free town of Tikva, accustomed to warm friendships with women, to men who were her pals. Here she was desperately lonely and constantly in minor trouble. Often she wondered if her troubles were caused by the particular corporate culture of Y-S, or if it would be the same in any multi enclave. There were twenty-three great mults that divided the world among them, enclaves on every continent and on space platforms. Among them they wielded power and enforced the corporate peace: raids, assassinations, skirmishes, but no wars since the Two Week War in 2017.

Josh had been born to an Israeli couple, survivors of the Two Week War a terrorist had launched with a nuclear device that had burned Jerusalem off the map, a conflagration of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons that had set the oilfields aflame and destroyed the entire region. He had been orphaned at ten, wandering without a country in the period Jews called the Troubles, when the whole world blamed them for the disasters that put an end to oil dependence in a maelstrom of economic chaos. Nothing had come easy to him in his life. The more he opened to her and told her, the more precious he seemed to her, in that fervid courtship, and the more she felt herself absolutely necessary to him. She was astonished that at first she had thought him cold. How he had suffered! He needed her like air itself.

He had seemed to be opening. Shortly after the marriage he had insisted upon, he began changing back. He acted happy. He seemed delighted with her; but from a distance. As for getting to know her better, as for sharing his inner life or taking an interest in hers, those pastimes seemed uninteresting to him, lacking in urgency. Ari was supposed to mend that breach. Since the birth of their son, all Josh's after-work energy focused on Ari. She often suspected that if they did not have Ari, they would have nothing to talk about. Their silence roared in her ears. Soon she was boiling with resentments. They fought forty skirmishes a day about nothing. As her grandmother Malkah had warned her when she married Josh, she had made a costly mistake. Living together combined for them the worst aspects of living alone and living with a stranger. Their major activity together was disagreeing. She had grown up in a benign household, for Malkah was feisty and opinionated but also loving

and funny. People did not have to live unremitting desperate wars. Shira had summoned her energy and left him.

She called up the time on her cornea. Only four minutes had passed since she had last asked. Finally the long-skulled face appeared and spoke, in its uninflected way, their names: Joshua Rogovin and Shira Shipman, re the custody of child Ari Rogovin. Even in Y-S, with its male dominance, women did not change their names. Marriages were on the basis of five- or ten-year contracts, and name changing without purpose was inefficient. Still, Shira felt an odd chill as she heard Ari's surname given as his father's. That was not how she had registered him at birth, but Y-S had ignored her preference.

"In regard to this matter the judgment of the panel is to award custody to the father, Joshua Rogovin, status T12A, the mother, Shira Shipman, status T10B, to have visitation privileges twice weekly, Wednesdays and Sundays. This verdict rendered 28 January 2059, automatic review on 28 January 2061. Verdict recorded. Out."

Josh turned in his seat and glared at her. His lawyer was beaming and slapping his shoulder. "What did I tell you? In the bag."

"They can't do this!" Shira said. "They can't take Ari!"

Josh grimaced, almost a smile. "He's mine now. He's my son, he's a Rogovin." His light eyes, somewhere between gray and blue, seemed to read her pain and dismiss it.

"Your ex-husband has a higher tech rating than you do," her lawyer said. "I warned you they would take that into account. You've been stuck in the same grade for three years."

"I'll appeal. Ari needs me." And I need him, she thought.

"It's your choice, but you're throwing away your credit, in my opinion. Of course I'll represent you if you choose to retain me."

Josh and his lawyer had already swept out. Shira's lawyer stood over her, impatiently tapping his foot. "I have another client to see. You think about the appeal. I can start the process tomorrow if you choose."

Suddenly she rose and rushed out, realizing she was late to pick up Ari. "Start the appeal," she called over her shoulder. "I won't let him go."

She hopped the express lane on the moving sidewalk, nimbly jumping from track to track. It was considered poor form for gruds—Glop slang for professional and technical personnel of multis—to do that, although day laborers did it all the time, but she did not care. She was desperate to reach Ari. She sped past

the gossamer structures of the official district. Since there was no weather under the dome, and since no structure could be taller than six stories, the prevailing style was long parabolic curves, fanciful spirals and labyrinthine grids of glittering translucent filigree. Almost everything was black, white or blue, like the backless business suits that came to mid-calf or lower, which all gruds wore. Almost every exec, male or female, had been under the knife to resemble the Y-S ideal, faces as much like the one on the view screen as each could afford.

The techies flashing past on the movers looked far more diverse, but they, too, dressed in suits of acceptable colors. People of the same rank greeted each other with ritual gestures, a bob of the head. Those farther down the hierarchy they usually ignored. Passing those above them, they awaited recognition and bowed deeply. How many times had she slipped into trouble by talking so intently she had inadvertently neglected to greet properly an equal or a superior? The day laborers wore overalls or uniforms in yellows, browns, greens: color coded for their jobs. If they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, it would be immediately evident. She leapt from track to track, never mind who saw her—who might report her—as undignified, lacking in proper Y-S decorum. She always felt too physical here, too loud, too female, too Jewish, too dark, too exuberant, too emotional.

The day care for the children of middle-level techies was just ahead now, behind a hedge of tall brightly colored crotons, the blue and white and black Y-S flag drooping over the entrance. She was not impossibly late, because she saw a few straggling mothers and one father as she ran the three blocks from the nearest mover. She realized she never saw an adult run on these streets. Everyone was too conscious of being observed, of being judged. This was the middle-tech compound of little houses, each in its yard. With Josh, she had lived in one of them. Four styles of house for this rank, with the same acceptable shrubs and manicured lawns, but a free choice of color. Nobody chose red or purple. The only vehicles that moved down the median strips were official: delivery trucks, repair and emergency vans, security apes, all battery-powered rigs that monotonously beeped.

The supervisor, Jane Forest, was noticeably cooler to her. "But, Shipman, a security assignee picked up Ari Rogovin eighteen minutes ago. We were informed this was proper. You are not authorized to pick up Ari Rogovin except on Wednesdays."

"An ape took him? But why?"

"Request information from security central, please."

Although Shira wanted to scream and argue, she was aware the supervisor would never alter orders given her; or Jane would no longer be a supervisor. Any protest Shira made would be ineffectual and recorded against her. She had to call her lawyer at once. Mostly she had a strong desire to call Malkah.

Even a month ago, she would have called her secretary, Rosario, for they had become close. But the low-level exec with whom Rosario had had a ten-year contract had not renewed their marriage. As was customary even for low-level talent, he had taken a new wife, twenty years younger. Rosario was forty-two, and Y-S let her go. Shira had protested that she needed Rosario, but she had no power. Women over forty who were not techies or supervisors or professionals or execs were let go if they were not the temporary property of a male grud. Female gruds were supposed to have the same privileges and, if they had enough position, often took young husbands.

Rosario had disappeared into the Glop. She might be tubed in and out of the enclave daily as a laborer, working in the laundry or cooking or doing any of the maintenance jobs not taken care of by robots, but Shira would never see her. Rosario had been pushed out of the safe fortress into the crowded violent festering warren of the half-starved Glop, where nine tenths of the people of Norika lived; if she was still alive, Shira would never know it. The Glop was slang for the Megalopolis that stretched south from what had been Boston to what had been Atlanta, and a term applied to other similar areas all over the continent and the world.

As soon as Shira reached the two-room apartment that was all she was entitled to by her own rating, one of the so-called bins for lower-level techies, she asked the apartment for messages. Every housing facility in the corporate enclave had a computer. Hers wasn't a sophisticated system like the one she had grown up with, programmed by Malkah, but it functioned as a message service. It told her that Malkah had called fifty minutes before. Shira called first her lawyer and then Malkah. She did not bother plugging in for conversations—nobody did. She just spoke her instructions. Malkah's round, slightly wizened face appeared, her hair, as black as Shira's braided around her head. "Shira, you look upset." Malkah had a deep resonant voice. Although she was Shira's grandmother, she had raised her. That was the way of her family, bat Shipman, until Shira had broken the pattern.



"Are you eating?" Shira asked politely. It was an hour later in the free town Tikva on the Atlantic, where Malkah lived, where Shira had grown up.

"What's wrong?" Malkah always came right to the point.

"Y-S awarded custody to Josh."

"Those pigsuckers," Malkah said. "Those poison belchers. I told you not to marry him. You're the first in our family to marry in four generations. It's a bad idea."

"All right, all right. I thought Josh needed the security."

"And could you give him security? Never mind. Come home."

"I can't just take off. Especially now. I'm lodging an appeal. I have to get Ari back. I have to."

"What does Y-S want?"

"From me? Nothing. They hardly know I exist."

"When you finished your graduate work at Edinburgh, six multis bid on you. And Y-S lets you sit and rot. It smells."

"I think my work's good, but nothing happens. Nobody here rates me as much."

Malkah snorted. "Come home. I can use you. I'm not working with Avram any longer. I'm designing full time."

"I thought that was an odd partnership."

"What he's doing is quite fascinating. But never mind. He's mad at me. He's a stubborn arrogant alter kaker, but he's a genius in his field, no doubt about that."

"Cybernetics has never drawn me. . . . Malkah, I can't stand to lose Ari. I miss him already." Tears began coursing down Shira's face.

"You should never have gone to work for those manipulators, Shira. You have a place here. You ran away. But Gadi's not living here. He's up in Veecee Beecee, making those elaborate worlds people play at living in instead of worrying about the one we're all stuck with."

"I made a lot of mistakes," Shira said. "But Ari wasn't one of them. He's precious, Malkah, he's life itself to me. I must have him back. He carries my heart in him."

"Daughter of my soul, I wish you strength. But a multi always has its reasons. It may take you a while to figure theirs, and when you do, that may not help you get your son back."

"So pray for me."

"You know I don't believe in personal petitions. All I can ever pray for is understanding."

Shira had forgotten to pick up a meal. She ate crackers and dates. Then she sat down at her terminal again and plugged in,