

When It Happens



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood spent much of her childhood in the great outdoors. Her father was an entomologist and much of her early life was shaped by her father's research. She did not attend school full-time until 12 years of age; however, she started writing fiction and poetry when she was as young as 6 years old. Atwood decided to make writing her profession at age 16 and soon after she attended the University of Toronto. Here she published several poems and articles before eventually graduating with an English degree. Afterwards, Atwood attended Harvard University where she attained her master's degree and began a doctoral dissertation, although she never finished it. Instead, she continued writing and soon became one of the most prolific authors of her generation. After publishing several volumes of poetry, Atwood released her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, in 1969. This novel helped establish Atwood's reputation, which she solidified over the next two decades. In particular, her short story collection *Dancing Girls* and her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* won her much praise from critics. *The Handmaid's Tale* has since become Atwood's most famous book as well as her most controversial. Throughout her life, Atwood has remained outspoken on political issues, particularly those concerning women and the environment. It is difficult to make a short list of Atwood's literary achievements, but along with those already mentioned, she also wrote the critically acclaimed novels *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Testaments* (2019).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are two historical events mentioned in "When It Happens" which make a clear impact on Mrs. Burridge. First, there is The Great Depression, which occurred between 1929-1939. Mrs. Burridge's character grew up during this time period and many of her behaviors reflect those of people who lived through it. The Great Depression was brought about by a stock market crash that caused many important institutions to fail, resulting in widespread poverty and food shortages. Jobs became difficult, if not impossible, to find. Because of this, many people who survived The Great Depression no longer trusted banks or the stock market. They often made themselves as self-sustainable as possible to shield themselves from similar future events. Likewise, those who survived World War II sometimes became skeptical of the media because of the propaganda it produced during the war. Mrs. Burridge explicitly acknowledges that she is one of those people and does not trust anything the news tells her. The second important

historical event, not mentioned in the story but serving as its backdrop, is the Cold War. The Cold War was centered around a nuclear weapons standoff between antagonistic national governments—primarily Western and capitalist versus Eastern and communist—and during its long duration (1947-1991), there was much anxiety around the possibility of nuclear annihilation. Mrs. Burridge's thoughts about explosions and smoke on the horizon echo common fears that existed during the time this story was written.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Margaret Atwood is best known for writing novels and short stories that fall under the genre of dystopian fiction. Although the dystopia in "When It Happens" is only imagined, the story worlds of Atwood's later works feature actual dystopias. Atwood's most famous dystopian novels are *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, both of which are set in the fictional Republic of Gilead. Atwood's dystopias are part of a tradition which includes George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*, along with Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. These influences—which fall under the category of speculative fiction—become clearer in her later work, but they are also present in "When It Happens." More recent examples of dystopian fiction include Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2016), and Atwood's own *Oryx and Crake* (2003).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** When It Happens
- **When Written:** 1977
- **Where Written:** Ontario, Canada
- **When Published:** 1977
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story, Realism, Dystopian Fiction
- **Setting:** A farm in an unspecified location
- **Climax:** Mrs. Burridge imagines an apocalyptic scenario where she is pointing a gun at two threatening men.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Dancing Girls. "When It Happens" was originally published as part of Atwood's first short story collection titled *Dancing Girls*.

The Booker Prize. Margaret Atwood is one of only five authors to win the Booker Prize twice. Her first win came in 2000 for the novel *The Blind Assassin* and the second came in 2019 for *The Testaments*.



PLOT SUMMARY

Mrs. Burridge, a 51-year-old woman, spends her day canning and storing green tomato pickle, a favorite food of her husband Frank. She and Frank live alone on an isolated farm. Though they have three children, all of them are now grown and live elsewhere. Therefore, Mrs. Burridge and Frank must fend for themselves and keep themselves occupied. It is the former that concerns Mrs. Burridge. Mrs. Burridge is a catastrophic thinker who is constantly worried about an apocalyptic scenario. She does not tell Frank about her thoughts, although Frank knows something is wrong.

Mrs. Burridge is also concerned about her relationship to Frank. The two of them are very comfortable around one another, but any sense of love and romance has been lost. Both are getting older, and Mrs. Burridge feels their mortality creeping up on them. She also worries about Frank's declining mobility and his capacity to protect her.

While her second batch of green tomato pickle simmers, Mrs. Burridge stares out her back door. This is something she does multiple times a day. Eventually, she believes she will see smoke on the horizon which will signal that something terrible has happened. Soon, her second batch of pickle is finished, and she takes it to the cellar. There, she thinks about how all of her canned food once brought her comfort. It doesn't anymore because Mrs. Burridge thinks that in the event of an apocalyptic scenario, she will have to leave her home, rendering most of the food useless.

After returning upstairs, Mrs. Burridge makes a grocery list on the back of [a calendar page](#). While making her list, Mrs. Burridge daydreams about a doomsday scenario. In the daydream, two farmers come to get Frank, and the three of them head straight for the source of the ambiguous catastrophe. Mrs. Burridge, convinced that she will never see Frank again, begins packing up her things with the intention of setting off on her own. She packs up all the essentials for survival, including a shotgun she has deliberately hidden from Frank in case of an event like this.

Afterwards, Mrs. Burridge frees all the farm animals and begins hiking up the road. She walks until it gets dark and then strays off the road and into the forest. She knows she has been to this area before with Frank, but for some reason it does not seem familiar. As she walks through the woods, she comes across two men sitting at a campfire. The two men immediately spot her and start moving toward her. This frightens Mrs. Burridge and so she raises her gun. Soon, she realizes she will have to shoot the men, although she does not know if she is capable of doing so. As the men come closer, the daydream suddenly ends. Mrs. Burridge is back in her kitchen and looking at the clock. She then finishes her grocery list and heads out the door.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Burridge – Mrs. Burridge is a 51-year-old woman who lives with her husband Frank Burridge on an isolated farm. Mrs. Burridge thinks Frank is a good man and relies on his care and protection, though she is often frustrated with him and fears he's becoming weaker lately. She and Frank have three children together, all of whom are now adults and live elsewhere. Despite being the main character, Mrs. Burridge's first name is never revealed. She lived through the Great Depression and World War II, both of which created in her a skepticism toward social institutions, particularly the media. At the start of the story, Mrs. Burridge is canning green tomato pickle, a process that normally makes her feel safe. Mrs. Burridge used to enjoy canning food to put in her cellar because it was something to rely on in case of hardship. However, more recently, Mrs. Burridge has become increasingly apocalyptic in her thinking. She spends much of her day waiting for a doomsday scenario that she is convinced will happen soon. In the event of such a catastrophe, Mrs. Burridge does not think that the food in her cellar will help her survive and she begins to make other plans. While writing a grocery list, Mrs. Burridge begins daydreaming about an apocalyptic scenario. In her daydream, Mrs. Burridge almost immediately sets out on her own with only a few personal items and a shotgun to keep her safe. Soon, she comes across two men in the woods who she thinks plan to harm her. She raises the gun, intending to fire at one of the men, and then the daydream stops. Afterwards, the story ends abruptly as Mrs. Burridge completes her grocery list and then leaves the house.

Frank Burridge – Frank Burridge is Mrs. Burridge's husband. He is a hard-working and generally kind man, although Mrs. Burridge is regularly annoyed with him and refers to him as "pigheaded." Frank does a majority of the manual labor around the Burridge house including tending the farm and performing menial tasks such as fixing the cellar stairs. Mrs. Burridge feels that she relies heavily on Frank to survive and does not know what she would do without him. Similarly, Frank relies on Mrs. Burridge to keep him fed and run the home. Mrs. Burridge and Frank know each other well and their marriage has fallen into certain patterns that Mrs. Burridge finds tiring. However, it is difficult to know if Frank feels the same way because the story never reveals his perspective. Largely, Frank leaves his wife alone and does not push her for answers, even when he knows she is lying. Throughout most of the story, Frank moves around in the background as Mrs. Burridge watches him and worries that he has become too weak to protect her. In Mrs. Burridge's apocalyptic daydream, Frank goes off with Henry Clarke and another farmer to try to find out what is going on. Mrs. Burridge abandons him in the daydream because she thinks he will not come back.

Sarah Burrige – Sarah Burrige is the daughter of Mrs. Burrige and Frank Burrige. She is the only Burrige child mentioned by name in the story, although little is known about her except that she is the eldest, and that Mrs. Burrige was pregnant with her when she first started gardening. Sarah is now fully grown and no longer lives with her parents.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Henry Clarke – Henry Clarke is a friend of Frank Burrige. The two of them once tried turkey farming together, although the venture failed miserably. Mrs. Burrige imagines Henry coming to get Frank in his truck during her apocalyptic fantasy.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE MUNDANE AND THE APOCALYPTIC

Margaret Atwood's "When It Happens" demonstrates how boredom and dissatisfaction can quickly twist themselves into something more sinister. Mrs. Burrige is a 51-year-old woman in a loveless marriage who constantly worries about the future. On the surface, she has no reason to be concerned: her children are alive and healthy, she and her husband Frank have more money than ever, and the farm they live on is largely self-sustaining. However, the information she hears in the media, the concern she reads on people's faces, and the apocalyptic visions she reads in *Watchtower* all make her believe something terrible is going to happen. Mrs. Burrige begins to imagine herself taking off on her own with a gun, eventually coming across some men who she believes she needs to shoot.

Although Mrs. Burrige's fears are genuine, the story also suggests that this possibility excites her; her life has become so mundane and easy that these apocalyptic fantasies are her way of passing the time. At this point in her life, her children are raised and there is little she needs to do to satisfy Frank. Instead, she spends much of her time staring out the back window, waiting to see smoke on the horizon that signals the coming apocalypse. By the end of the story, the same boredom that created this line of thinking makes even menial tasks difficult for Mrs. Burrige, as a grocery list written on the back of [the calendar page](#) quickly becomes an exercise in catastrophic thinking. Ultimately, Mrs. Burrige's apocalyptic predictions never come to fruition, yet the effect they have on her is keenly felt.



CONTROL VS. LACK OF CONTROL

"When It Happens" depicts an extreme case of a universal fear: the lack of control one has over the future. Mrs. Burrige desires to control every aspect of her life. Her home is largely self-sustaining and includes animals for food and milk, a gas pump, and plenty of room for storage. Yet, Mrs. Burrige constantly worries that these things are not enough. She works hard to create a surplus of goods, only to worry about people coming to steal those goods. Her life is a vicious cycle in which she performs an action that is meant to make her feel more in control, but that action actually creates more problems, at least in her mind. Mrs. Burrige also regularly worries about the abilities that she lacks. For a long time, she has relied on Frank for protection, but she realizes that this is no longer a viable option in his old age. She wants to be able to use a gun to protect herself, but she never asks him to teach her how, and even in her fantasies she has a hard time pulling the trigger. Ultimately, then, there is a cruel irony to Mrs. Burrige's actions (or failures to act), because her desire for control results in a repetitious and mundane way of living that only perpetuates her fears rather than helping her confront them.



FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND ISOLATION

In "When It Happens," Atwood suggests that Mrs. Burrige's boredom and unhappiness stem from her lack of interaction with her family and the broader community. From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Mrs. Burrige is not happy with her marriage; she does not hate Frank, but she also no longer loves him. This fact is solidified later in the story, during the apocalyptic fantasy where she sets out on her own, leaving Frank behind. In addition, while Mrs. Burrige occasionally speaks to her children, none of them feature regularly in her life, and two of them are never even given names in the story. Similarly, while Mrs. Burrige knows her neighbors, none of them could be classified as friends. As such, Mrs. Burrige has no one to confide in; she does not even tell Frank about her concerns for the future, and she plans to hide one of his guns from him if something were to happen. Although Mrs. Burrige spends most of the story worrying about isolation due to a catastrophic event, what she does not realize is that she has already isolated herself by doing so. While the story doesn't specify how and at what point Mrs. Burrige's isolation began, it's clear that her way of coping—chiefly through worry and fantasy—only makes her isolation intractable.



THE PATTERNS OF DOMESTIC LIFE

"When It Happens" is concerned with the patterns people fall into after living together for a long time. Mrs. Burrige and Frank have lived together for

many years; they have three children, all of whom are now fully grown and live elsewhere. During their many years together, they have come to know each other intimately. Although the story never allows access to Frank's thoughts, Mrs. Burridge has a clear sense of what she sees as Frank's strengths and faults. She despises what she calls his "pigheadedness" but ultimately sees him as a kind man who never wishes anybody any harm.

However, despite her overall positive opinion of Frank, it is obvious that Mrs. Burridge no longer loves him. They do not communicate in any significant way, but instead revert to common rituals that feel comfortable. For instance, Mrs. Burridge will tease Frank about what he eats, and he responds that she needs to have more fun in life. This is not a sporadic moment in the story, but rather something that happens on a daily basis, always more or less the same way. This creates a monotonous existence for both Frank and Mrs. Burridge that they seem unable to break out of. Again, Frank's thoughts never enter the narration, but Mrs. Burridge is clearly unhappy. Her fantasies take the form of hiding things from Frank and abandoning him in the event of a catastrophe—fantasies that, as the story goes on, Mrs. Burridge almost seems to want to happen. Although these fantasies are also spurred on by other larger social institutions such as the media, the core of Mrs. Burridge's uncertainty and unhappiness originates in her marriage, which has settled into a seemingly unbreakable cycle—one so stagnant that it can only be broken by an apocalyptic event.

Mrs. Burridge is uncomfortable with the recurring patterns of her everyday life and the calendar is a symbol of the unvarying nature of her existence. Each passing day for Mrs. Burridge is always the same, so much so that she daydreams about an apocalyptic event that would thoroughly rupture the temporal patterns of her life.

However, instead of counting down to a doomsday scenario, at the end of the story, the calendar is still just scrap paper. Mrs. Burridge uses it to write her grocery list and nothing more. The calendar never actually represents a countdown to extinction, then, though it is still a *memento mori*—a constant reminder of the inevitability of death—for Mrs. Burridge.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Dancing Girls: And Other Stories* published in 1996.

When It Happens Quotes

☹️ It used to annoy Mrs. Burridge, especially the crumbs, but now she watches him with a kind of sadness; she once thought their life together would go on forever but she has come to realize this is not the case.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge, Frank Burridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This is a passage from early in the story that sets up some of its primary themes while also establishing the Burridges' relationship. Specifically, this moment occurs while Mrs. Burridge is thinking about how Frank often makes a mess while eating her green tomato pickle. Although Frank's mess used to annoy her, her annoyance is now displaced by sadness.

The second half of the quote has a dual meaning, part of which only becomes apparent later in the story. On the surface, it seems as though Mrs. Burridge is talking about death; after all, both she and Frank are getting old and eventually, one of them will die. Indeed, aging and death are central concerns in the story. However, the latter half of the story reveals the secondary nature of Mrs. Burridge's concern; she is not simply worried about death, she is worried about the end of the world.

Much of "When It Happens" is similar to this quote in that it



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE CALENDAR PAGE



The calendar pages in "When It Happens" symbolize the time Mrs. Burridge feels she is wasting. Calendars are objects that track time, and Mrs. Burridge's page-a-day calendar condenses the span of a year into a single, disposable space. Presumably, at the end of each day, Mrs. Burridge rips off a calendar page to reveal the next one. She then uses the discarded calendar pages to complete menial tasks, such as writing her grocery list. Throughout the story, it is revealed that Mrs. Burridge is dissatisfied with her life; she feels that she has fallen into a repetitious and empty state of being. Similarly, she treats the calendar pages—symbols of the passage of time—as though they are completely expendable.

The calendar is also significant because it is a gift that Frank gets her every year. Therefore, it not only represents the passage of time, but also a sense of repetition within that time.

utilizes ambiguity to make Mrs. Burridge's worries initially relatable, even though they are ultimately revealed to be more apocalyptic than they appear on the surface.

On paper Frank is making more money than he ever has; yet they seem to have less to spend. They could always sell the farm, she supposes, to people from the city who would use it as a weekend place; they could get what seems like a very high price, several of the farms south of them have gone that way. But Mrs. Burridge does not have much faith in money; also it is a waste of the land, this is her home, she has it arranged the way she wants it.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge, Frank Burridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

While canning her green tomato pickle, Mrs. Burridge spends much of her time thinking about her economic situation. As is often the case, even if things seem to be going okay on the surface, Mrs. Burridge finds a reason to worry.

Another constant in this story, which is made apparent in this quotation, is Mrs. Burridge's fear of people from the city. Over the course of the story, it becomes clear that Mrs. Burridge has never met someone outside of her small community, nor does she ever intend to. The idea that someone would use her house as a weekend getaway rather than a home is offensive to Mrs. Burridge. She fears what others would do to the space she has carefully arranged, especially if those others are people she does not know or understand.

Additionally, this quote demonstrates Mrs. Burridge's tendency to contradict herself. She is worried about money, yet she also has little faith in it. This speaks both to her incessant worrying about mundane things and her pessimism about the larger world.

When the second batch is on and simmering she goes to the back door, opens it and stands with her arms folded across her stomach, looking out. She catches herself doing this four or five times a day now and she doesn't quite know why . . . She isn't sure what she is looking for but she has the odd idea she may see something burning, smoke coming up from the horizon, a column of it or perhaps more than one column, off to the south.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 121


Explanation and Analysis

While cooking green tomato pickle, or performing other household errands, Mrs. Burridge regularly goes to her back door and does exactly what is described in this quote. In part, this is a ritual created out of boredom; everything Mrs. Burridge does around the house she has done for decades, and while it comforts her, it also leaves her with a lot of time on her hands. This passage clearly demonstrates the compulsive and repetitive nature of her actions.

Furthermore, Mrs. Burridge's description of what she will see on the horizon—smoke on the horizon—evokes imagery of nuclear warfare. “When It Happens” was written during the Cold War, a period when the possibility of a nuclear weapons strike was very real. Mrs. Burridge's repeated trips to the back door suggest that the vague, looming threat of nuclear warfare is closely tied to her mundane everyday experience. This connection, in turn, hints that Mrs. Burridge's isolation and domestic boredom make her especially vulnerable to apocalyptic fears.

The cellar is the old kind, with stone walls and a dirt floor. Mrs. Burridge likes to have everything neat . . . The pickles go on one side, jams and jellies on the other, and the quarts of preserves along the bottom. It used to make her feel safe to have all that food in the cellar; she would think to herself, Well, if there's a snowstorm or anything and we're cut off, it won't be so bad. It doesn't make her feel safe any more. Instead she thinks that if she has to leave suddenly she won't be able to take any of the jars with her, they'd be too heavy to carry.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 122



Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after Mrs. Burridge completes her batch of green tomato pickle and moves it into the cellar. Mrs. Burridge's cellar is a spatial representation of her desire to control everything around her, including Frank. She made Frank build her the shelves, which she now uses to neatly order all of her canned food.

However, even a cellar stocked with food is no longer enough to put a stop to Mrs. Burridge's worrying. Mrs. Burridge has not yet entirely revealed her fears of the coming apocalypse, so this moment in the story is another instance of foreshadowing. At this point, all readers know is that Mrs. Burridge has some vague fear of the future—a fear that includes the possibility of leaving her well-stocked home suddenly. It is clear at this point that it would be devastating for Mrs. Burridge to leave her home, as it is the one place she feels she has control over. Leaving home, and her carefully-stocked shelves of preserves, would represent a catastrophic loss of control for Mrs. Burridge.

☝ She comes back up the stairs after the last trip. It's not as easy as it used to be, her knee still bothers her as it has ever since she fell six years ago, she tripped on the second-last step. She's asked Frank a million times to fix the stairs but he hasn't done it, that's what she means by pig-headed. If she asks him more than twice to do something he calls it nagging, and maybe it is, but who's going to do it if he won't? The cold vacant hole at the back of this question is too much for her.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge, Frank Burridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After storing the green tomato pickle in the cellar, Mrs. Burridge makes her way back upstairs, resulting in this moment of the story. This passage highlights the problem of aging—something that only moves more to the forefront as the story progresses—and gets to the depressing core of the Burridges' relationship.

Clearly, Mrs. Burridge cannot make her way up the stairs as easily as she used to. She worries about what this means in regard to taking care of herself; given her apocalyptic beliefs about the future, self-reliance will be important, and

this is a moment where she feels that independence slipping away.

Additionally, this is a moment in the story where Frank appears rather cold-hearted or at least neglectful. Despite the fact that his wife injured herself coming up the steps, he has still neglected to repair them and instead accuses his wife of nagging.

However, the most striking part of this passage is its final lines, which reveal the core problem of the Burridges' relationship: they are stuck with one another. At this point, after raising three kids and living way out in the country, the Burridges have no one else to turn to except one another. This is a horrible truth that Mrs. Burridge finds difficult to contemplate. Her apocalyptic fantasies could even be interpreted as a way to cope with this ominous sense of isolation or perhaps to explore it indirectly.

☝ He can't protect me. She doesn't think this on purpose, it simply occurs to her, and it isn't only him, it's all of them, they've lost the power, you can tell by the way they walk. They are all waiting, just as Mrs. Burridge is, for whatever it is to happen. Whether they realize it or not.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge, Frank Burridge

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After returning from the cellar, Mrs. Burridge walks over to a window and watches Frank walk toward the barn. While looking at Frank, Mrs. Burridge notices how much he is showing his age, which leads her to think about his inability to protect her. Although Mrs. Burridge is most concerned about Frank—he is her husband, after all—she also worries about the entire generation of men that Frank is a part of, the same generation that fought in World War II. Frank himself is never explicitly stated to be a veteran, although certain details in the story suggest he might be.

As Mrs. Burridge watches her husband, she is stricken by the extent to which he has aged. He is now someone in need of protection rather than someone who can be relied upon to do the protecting. Mrs. Burridge is convinced that everyone is like her: waiting for something to happen, even if they do not know it. Again, this is another instance where Mrs. Burridge appears to be talking about death, making the statement universal and therefore relatable, even though it

will soon be revealed that she is thinking about something more extreme.

☞ All her life, ever since she got married, she has made lists of things that have to be bought, sewed, planed, cooked, stored; she already has her list made for next Christmas, all the names and the gift she will buy for each, and the list of what she needs for Christmas dinner. But she can't seem to get interested in it, it's too far away. She can't believe in a distant future that is orderly like the past, she no longer seems to have the energy; it's as if she is saving it up for when she will have to use it.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 123



Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes shortly after the previous one, while Mrs. Burridge is still staring out the back window. This passage reveals the extent to which Mrs. Burridge has always made sure to plan well in advance, a ritual that made her feel safe. However, she is no longer able to do so; time is too slippery now and her old age does not allow for her to do as much.

Although the narration—which is influenced by Mrs. Burridge's perspective—suggests that she may be saving up her energy, the rest of “When It Happens” tells a different story. Instead, there is a much more frightening possibility: Mrs. Burridge may not have any energy left. The careful planning that has sustained her thus far is no longer a viable option—at least as far as she is concerned—because of her fear of the apocalypse, a scenario where, even in her own mind, she fares poorly and must struggle just to survive.

☞ Mrs. Burridge wishes someone would be more precise, so she could make better plans. Everyone knows something is going to happen, you can tell by reading the newspapers and watching the television, but nobody is sure what it will be, nobody can be exact.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 124


Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes after Mrs. Burridge sits down to make her shopping list and begins thinking about a possible apocalyptic scenario. As with previous moments in the story, this section highlights her desire to be able to control the future. It also demonstrates her steadfast belief that everyone agrees with her that something bad will happen, although no one else in the story ever validates this belief.

Furthermore, this passage makes mention of the media, a social influence that is important to this story, even if it only appears in a few brief moments. Here and elsewhere, it is made clear that Mrs. Burridge does not trust the media and therefore cannot rely on it for accurate information. However, she does seem to believe that the media is useful as a purveyor of *disinformation*—information that is deliberately meant to mislead. Rather than using the media for information in any traditional sense, then, Mrs. Burridge uses what the media says as proof that the opposite is true.

☞ It is about this time too that she takes one of the guns, she thinks it will be the shotgun as she will have a better chance of hitting something, and hides it along with the shells, under a piece of roofing behind the barn. She does not tell Frank; he will have the twenty-two. She has already picked out the spot.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge, Frank Burridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis



Toward the end of the story, Mrs. Burridge begins thinking about the order in which bad things will happen. This passage comes directly after Mrs. Burridge thinks about seeing strange men near her property, presumably those fleeing from cities.

Although it is difficult to judge in each moment how serious Mrs. Burridge is about her potential future actions, this quote offers a damning picture of the Burridges' relationship. Mrs. Burridge does not trust Frank at all and would rather rely on herself than tell him the truth. This is especially problematic given that Mrs. Burridge has never fired a gun in her life, nor does she plan on asking Frank to help her. Even she does not have any faith in her abilities, which is why she chooses the easier-to-handle shotgun. Because it's not yet clear what Mrs. Burridge intends to do

with the shotgun, this quote shifts toward a markedly more ominous tone in the story.

●● He comes out, kisses her goodbye, which is unusual too, and says he'll be back in a couple of hours. She watches the three of them drive off in Henry Clarke's truck, towards the smoke, she knows he will not come back. She supposes she ought to feel more emotional about it, but she is well prepared, she has been saying goodbye to him silently for years.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge, Frank Burridge, Henry Clarke

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

At this point, the story has begun to blur the lines between what is real and what is in Mrs. Burridge's head. Although it is eventually made clear that this moment is imagined, the narration is immediate, suggesting that these events are actually happening. This quote comes shortly into Mrs. Burridge's imagined apocalypse, just after she and Frank spot smoke on the horizon.

In this passage, Frank comes off as quite heroic, running toward trouble rather than away from it like his wife. Although it may seem like Mrs. Burridge has a high opinion of her husband given that this is how she imagines him, she quickly undermines that fact with her unemotional goodbye.

In addition, this is another moment where Mrs. Burridge's paranoid visions of the future intersect with a genuine moment in her personal life. Though the events she describes never come to fruition, she has been "saying goodbye" to Frank for years. Their relationship has slowly crumbled and Frank's place in her daydreams is proof of

this.

●● She must wait until they are close enough and then she must raise the gun and shoot them, using one barrel for each, aiming at the faces. Otherwise, they will kill her, she has no doubt about that. She will have to be fast, which is too bad because her hands feel thick and wooden; she is afraid, she does not want the loud noise of the burst of red that will follow, she has never killed anything in her life. She has no pictures beyond this point. You never know how you will act in a thing like that until it actually happens.

Related Characters: Mrs. Burridge

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the end of the story. Mrs. Burridge has set off on her own into the wilderness where she encounters two men, both of whom she believes mean her harm. Presumably, these men are from the city or someplace else that's unfamiliar, because Mrs. Burridge has a hard time imagining how they will speak and because she immediately finds them threatening.

It is this moment in Mrs. Burridge's daydream where she realizes that no matter what she does, she cannot prepare for such a scenario. Her imagination can only go so far, and her life experience has not prepared her for the horrors she would face in this type of situation. Although Mrs. Burridge acknowledges her inability to prepare for such things, it is not clear that she comes to terms with it. Shortly after this moment in her fantasy, Mrs. Burridge snaps back to mundane reality, where she's writing her shopping list. The abrupt ending of her daydream underscores the story's link between Mrs. Burridge's isolated, stagnant life and the uncontrollable future she fears.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

WHEN IT HAPPENS

Mrs. Burridge stores 12 quarts of green tomato pickles in jars. She knows there is a strike at the factory that makes her jars, so she is happy she has so many left over in her cellar. Mrs. Burridge has lots of green tomatoes because she spent the previous evening picking all she could find after hearing a frost was coming. She makes her husband Frank help her—which she says he likes to do—although she knows she can do the task herself. The news claims that the price of green tomatoes will rise after the frost, but Mrs. Burridge thinks that the stores will reap the benefit, not the growers.

Mrs. Burridge feels as though she has grown wealthier, despite the relative uselessness of the green tomatoes. Frank is skeptical that the two of them can eat such a large amount of green tomato pickle, as they live by themselves. Mrs. Burridge believes that Frank will eat them all himself, although she does not say so out loud. She thinks about how Frank eats the pickle constantly and often makes a mess. At one point, the mess bothered Mrs. Burridge, but now it just makes her sad because it makes her think about how their lives together will eventually come to an end.

Mrs. Burridge regularly jokes with Frank about how much he eats. She no longer gets any joy out of doing this, but she feels it is expected of her. In response, Frank tells her “You need a little fun in life.” This back and forth is a common ritual for the two of them and Mrs. Burridge generally ignores Frank and continues to garden and make a lot of pickles. Mrs. Burridge started her garden in 1952 and has made pickles ever since. During that time, she was pregnant with her daughter Sarah, which made gardening difficult. When Mrs. Burridge was young, making your own pickles was a common practice, but it died out after World War II because pickles became available in stores. Mrs. Burridge’s friends don’t understand why she continues to make her own pickles, but she is glad she kept it up because store prices continue to increase.

As readers are introduced to Mrs. Burridge, they learn that she is keenly aware of the economic factors at play in her local economy; she knows about a strike at the jar factory and she is aware of how the weather will affect the price of green tomatoes. It’s surprising that she would care about details like this, which suggests that she goes out of her way to pay attention to such things. Additionally, it is clear that Mrs. Burridge likes to feel in control. She claims Frank likes to help her out, although later she will contradict herself.



There is much that goes unsaid between Mrs. Burridge and Frank, as though they have had similar conversations before and don’t think such trivial matters are worth arguing over anymore. Mrs. Burridge also seems to hold back because she does not know how much longer the two of them will be together. The Burridges’ marriage has a sense of comfortable familiarity, but perhaps also stagnation.



Mrs. Burridge and Frank have fallen into patterns of behavior that they recognize, but continue to do anyway. This appears to be the only way the two of them still communicate, so it is a necessary ritual to keep up. Instead of speaking with her husband, Mrs. Burridge prefers to tend to and think about her garden, which allows her to be self-sustainable. Like her conversations with Frank, Mrs. Burridge’s gardening is a ritual she has kept up over many years and it remains a source of comfort for her. It is also something she associates with her daughter Sarah and the bringing forth of new life.



Although Frank brings in more money than ever, Mrs. Burridge feels as though they are becoming poorer. She thinks about selling their farm to someone from the city who wants a weekend getaway, but she “does not have much faith in money.” In addition, she feels like the new owner would not make use of the land, and she does not want to give up her home.

Here, Mrs. Burridge contradicts herself; she is worried about money, yet claims she does not have faith in it. The same can be said of many of Mrs. Burridge’s worries throughout the story, and as the contradictory statements begin to add up, it becomes clear that worrying is a hobby for Mrs. Burridge. Additionally, this is the first of several times Mrs. Burridge will express fear of city people. For her, the city is an example of the unknown, and as the story progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Mrs. Burridge does not know how to cope with the unknown.



While waiting for her second batch of pickle to simmer, Mrs. Burridge “goes to the back door, opens it and stands with her arms folded across her stomach, looking out.” This is something she does several times per day but does not know why. There is nothing special to look at, but she feels as though one day she will see a fire on the horizon. However, she does not tell anyone about what she is thinking, including Frank. When Frank asks her about what she is doing, she tells a bad lie and says she heard a dog’s bark that she did not recognize.

Searching the horizon is something Mrs. Burridge does when she is bored. Once her pickle is on the stove, she does not know what else to do with herself and so she stares at the horizon and worries. Again, the horizon is an example of the unknown—it is a space she looks at, but it is not one she is familiar with. Mrs. Burridge’s descriptions of what she might see on the horizon bring to mind nuclear warfare, a very real threat at the time this story was written. In addition, this section again highlights the disconnect between Mrs. Burridge and Frank. Although they converse with one another, they do not speak openly and honestly about their inner lives, suggesting that though their marriage is familiar, it’s not truly intimate.



Frank does not press Mrs. Burridge on her lie any further. She thinks it’s because he does not want to bring up the odd behavior she’s begun to exhibit in her old age. This makes sense to Mrs. Burridge because although Frank is messy, it pains him to hurt someone’s feelings. Mrs. Burridge is annoyed by his “pigheadedness” but ultimately finds him to be “a kind and likable man.” It is difficult for her to admit this to herself because of how often Frank makes her angry.

Mrs. Burridge likes to make guesses about what Frank is thinking, but she does not appear to know his thoughts any better than he knows hers. Additionally, it is significant that Mrs. Burridge admits to her “odd behavior” because up to now, she has come off as relatively normal. This admission flags Mrs. Burridge as an unreliable figure and changes the tone of the story. Also, Mrs. Burridge’s opinions of Frank suggest that their marriage is not truly happy; the anger she feels toward him overrides any sense of fondness.



After the pickles cool, Mrs. Burridge creates labels and then moves the jars down to the cellar. Mrs. Burridge is well-organized and always makes sure each of her preserved foods gets its own spot. Seeing all of the food in the cellar used to make Mrs. Burridge feels safe because she and Frank would be okay if bad weather temporarily cut them off from civilization. However, now Mrs. Burridge worries that some sort of crisis could make her leave her home and she knows she cannot take all of the jars with her.

Mrs. Burridge’s well-organized cellar is another example of her desire for control. She cannot help it if bad weather comes, but she can make sure she is prepared. However, contradicting her desire for control is her insatiable capacity for worrying. Although she has all the food she could ever need, she is still not satisfied; instead she finds another scenario to worry about, one in which the food is rendered almost useless.



After placing the pickles in the cellar, Mrs. Burridge goes back up the stairs. In recent years, climbing the stairs has become more difficult for Mrs. Burridge because her knee bothers her from tripping up them previously. Mrs. Burridge repeatedly asks Frank to fix the stairs to avoid subsequent falls, but he has yet to do so. Instead, he tells her she is nagging him whenever she repeats the request. Even though Mrs. Burridge agrees that she might be nagging him, she thinks “but who’s going to do it if he won’t?” There is an emptiness in this question that Mrs. Burridge finds difficult to deal with.

Mrs. Burridge’s age is another source of distress for her. Old age is hindering her ability to rely on herself and her only other option is Frank. However, unlike she claimed previously, Frank apparently does not like to help her. This is deeply troubling to Mrs. Burridge; she spent her entire life relying on two people—one being herself—and soon neither will be a viable option. Although much of Mrs. Burridge’s worrying throughout the story is excessive, this particular concern is legitimate and significant. In fact, it is generally true that Mrs. Burridge’s anxieties can be traced back to reasonable and relatable sources.



Now back on the first floor of their home, Mrs. Burridge actively resists taking another trip to the back door. However, as an alternative, she goes to the back window where the view is more or less the same. She sees Franks moving to their barn with something that looks like a wrench in his hand. Frank walks gingerly and slightly hunched over, showing his age. Mrs. Burridge wonders how long he’s walked like that and thinks about how he can no longer protect her. Mrs. Burridge knows that this isn’t just true of Frank, but also of other men his age. She believes it is clear by the way they walk that “they’ve lost the power.” Instead, she thinks, “They are all waiting [...] for whatever it is to happen. Whether they realize it or not.”

By not going to the back door, Mrs. Burridge seems to acknowledge that her actions are unhealthy. Of course, moving to the window is no better, but the view she is treated to does anchor her worries about Frank in reality. Indeed, Frank does appear old and soon there will be tasks he can no longer perform. Frank is of a generation of men who fought in World War II, although it is not clear if he is a veteran. Regardless, there is a sadness and a dread Mrs. Burridge feels about this generation losing their “power” to old age. Although Mrs. Burridge will shortly reveal her ideas about what is to “happen,” here it sounds as though she is simply talking about death. Again, although she will soon go in a more surprising direction, her fears about old age and death are universally relatable.



When Mrs. Burridge goes into town and sees other women, she reads anxiety and fear in their faces. She thinks that, like her, they are worried about their capabilities in a crisis. Mrs. Burridge relates to the fear and so, for the last few weeks, she’s wanted Frank to show her how to handle one of his guns. Frank typically uses his guns for hunting ducks and the groundhogs that ruin their fields. In this case, Mrs. Burridge is concerned about her safety, but she does not want to ask Frank because she does not want to tell him what she thinks will happen. If Mrs. Burridge doesn’t tell him the truth, then she thinks Frank will tease her, saying, “who you planning to kill?” On second thought, she is unsure if this will be his response because she stopped paying attention to “things outside the house” 20 years ago.

Perhaps the townsfolk are stricken by fear and anxiety, but Mrs. Burridge should not necessarily be taken at her word. Although she regularly reads the thoughts and emotions of others, the narration never leaves her limited perspective and therefore the feelings of others are never confirmed. Additionally, it appears Mrs. Burridge’s fears are ramping up and she is attempting to transition from thoughts to actions. If Frank can no longer take care of her, then she wants to take care of herself. Once again, Frank appears oblivious to her true intentions and it is reiterated that the two of them essentially live in separate spheres of existence.



Mrs. Burridge knows she will never hear Frank’s response to her question because she never plans to ask him. She does not want to tell him her fears such as, “Maybe you’ll be dead. Maybe you’ll go off somewhere when it happens, maybe there will be a war.” All of these thoughts occur to her as she is looking out the back window. However, she sees nothing outside, so she moves to the kitchen to make a shopping list.

Again, Mrs. Burridge does not want to tell Frank what she is thinking. Death and separation, or whatever she expects to “happen” someday, are too much for her to put into words and so she is left with her thoughts. As is the case for much of the story, Mrs. Burridge moves suddenly from profound subjects to mundane matters such as making a grocery list.



Mrs. Burridge's trip into town is the next day, and she wants to plan it so that she is not on her feet for too long. If she puts too much stress on her feet, they begin to swell, something that first occurred after Sarah was born. Mrs. Burridge has always been good about planning things in advance and already has next Christmas planned. However, now she finds this difficult because she believes the future is so uncertain. Instead, she would rather save her energy in case something happens. Even the shopping list—which she writes on **the back of a calendar page**—is difficult for her to focus on.

Rather than write her list, Mrs. Burridge gazes around the room and thinks about all of the things she cannot take with her if she is forced to leave her home. In particular, she is sad at the idea of leaving behind valuable and sentimental items, such as her mother's fine china, gifts for her children, and her grandmother's quilt. She also thinks about her wedding photos, which show her in satin—a decision she regrets—and Frank in a suit that he only puts on now to go to funerals. In addition, she thinks of her children's baby pictures and worries about her potential grandchildren. She hopes that her kids will not have children of their own because "it is no longer the right time for it."

Mrs. Burridge wants someone to tell her what is going to happen so she can be prepared. She thinks everyone feels the way she does because of what she sees in the media. However, "nobody can be exact." That said, Mrs. Burridge has her thoughts about what will happen. She thinks the world will become quiet, giving her the sense that something is off. There will be no more planes in the sky and very few noises from cars on the nearby highway. She believes the media will downplay the catastrophe and instead become "sweet-tempered and placating" rather than report on negative material like they do currently. This behavior will be a result of censorship, something Mrs. Burridge experienced during World War II.

Afterwards, Mrs. Burridge is unsure of the order in which things will happen. However, she believes that soon—without explanation—there will be no more gas and oil, something she will realize when the delivery man does not show up. She thinks the powers that be—exactly who this is she does not know—will not want people to panic. Instead, they will want things to look normal, even if they are not. Mrs. Burridge worries that is the case even in the present moment. She feels lucky that she and Frank store a fuel tank in their shed, a private gas pump, and a wood stove.

It is significant that Mrs. Burridge cannot be on her feet for too long, both because it is a bit of foreshadowing and because it again reveals the limitations of her old age. Her ability to plan ahead is also hindered, even if she is just thinking about the next few days. Additionally, the calendar page on which Mrs. Burridge writes is a representation of the time she has wasted and the time she has left. It is a constant reminder of her own mortality, although not one she consciously recognizes.



It appears that Mrs. Burridge's current preoccupation is the fear she will have to leave her home, a space she simultaneously loves and feels trapped in. Her love for her family—or at least what her family used to be—shines through, although it is not without regrets. The fact that Frank's wedding suit is now only used for funerals is yet another reminder of the Burridges' mortality. In addition, it could suggest that marrying Frank was a sort of metaphorical death for Mrs. Burridge. Mrs. Burridge not wanting grandchildren indicates a deep pessimism about the future, which is especially telling given that she seems to treasure family in general.



Although it is not mentioned frequently, the media played a significant role in how Mrs. Burridge now thinks. She suspects that they are always lying, and without media she can trust or other people around, she is left to her own thoughts. At this point, it becomes clear that Mrs. Burridge is worried about an earth-shattering event. She never provides specifics, although once again the possibility of nuclear war is hinted at.



Mrs. Burridge is careful to keep her claims vague. She does not seem to know a lot about geopolitics but she is skeptical of political institutions and does not believe that they are truthful to everyday people. Although she and Frank are largely self-sustaining in their lifestyle, their isolation leaves them vulnerable to the media's lies, as she sees it, because they have no one around to confirm or deny the media's claims.



Mrs. Burridge also thinks the phone wires will go down and no one will repair them. This doesn't bother Mrs. Burridge too much because she does not like the phone, but it will cause increased isolation. Around the same time, she thinks she will see young men walking along their back road, moving north. They will not look like the locals. Mrs. Burridge has not seen anyone on the back road in a long time and so this will be a cause for concern. She will have to let her dogs roam free to scare off potential intruders.

Mrs. Burridge previously had to keep her dogs chained because they once bit a Jehovah's Witness. Mrs. Burridge is not a Jehovah's Witness herself, "but she respects their perseverance." She also regularly purchases issues of *Watchtower*, the monthly religious magazine circulated by Jehovah's Witnesses. Now she is starting to think that the Jehovah's Witnesses are correct.

When the phone lines go down and Mrs. Burridge starts seeing men on the back road, she plans to take one of Frank's guns, probably the shotgun, and hide it under the roofing that sits on the backside of their barn. She does not plan to tell Frank about this because he will have his own gun. Also, during this time, she and Frank will need to use gasoline scarcely and they will have to eat their chickens. Mrs. Burridge hates preparing chickens and so she is especially not looking forward to doing so. It reminds her of "the angriest she ever got at Frank," which is when he tried his hand at turkey farming. She hated the turkeys because she found them to be stupid and they ruined her garden. In addition, she had to pluck one turkey per week, and ultimately, they did not make any money.

The next step in Mrs. Burridge's vision of the future is for the electricity to slowly fade until it no longer works at all. She thinks this will ironically occur in November when food could be kept frozen outdoors anyway. Mrs. Burridge recalls the sentiment during the Great Depression that farm people had an advantage over those in the city because they had food. However, Mrs. Burridge is worried that is no longer the case. Instead, she and Frank will be completely isolated, and no electricity means no radio, television, or music.

Mrs. Burridge's fear of city people is apparent in this section. The people who "will not look like the locals" are presumably those who are retreating from cities, and Mrs. Burridge treats them like harbingers of the apocalypse. It is also clear that she has no desire to help such people and instead wants to try to scare them off.



Jehovah's Witnesses are a sect of Christianity that believes Armageddon is close at hand. Armageddon is essentially the biblical version of the apocalypse that results in hell on earth. Although Mrs. Burridge does not personally hold such religious beliefs, the fact that she regularly consumes apocalyptic ideas and is beginning to be swayed by them is revealing of her current mindset.



Mrs. Burridge's lack of trust in Frank is solidified in this section. Even in an apocalyptic scenario, she plans to lie to him. Furthermore, the detail she includes in this daydream suggests she has thought about such things many times before. Yet, even in her daydreams, she still finds time to digress and be mad at Frank, in this case for turkey farming. This suggests that her feelings about the direction of the world in general are largely tied to the direction of her personal life, although she is completely unaware of this fact.



Mrs. Burridge's predictions are once again shown to be excessively pessimistic, although the events she has lived through help to explain this. Both World War II and the Great Depression resulted in a fair degree of skepticism of social and economic institutions such as banks and the media. Many people of Mrs. Burridge's generation remained skeptical of such institutions their entire lives, although, once again, Mrs. Burridge certainly represents an extreme version of this style of thinking.



One day, Mrs. Burridge wakes up to find “columns of smoke,” so she finds Frank and the two of them stand and watch. It looks as though something has blown up. This makes Mrs. Burridge concerned for her children. She has not heard from them in quite some time because there has not been any mail. Soon Henry Clarke shows up in a large truck with a man from a nearby farm. Frank gives them all of the remaining gas and then tells Mrs. Burridge that the two men are going to check out “a little trouble down the road.” He then asks Mrs. Burridge for the shotgun, and she says she does not know where it is. He looks for it, cannot find it, and then kisses her goodbye before leaving with Henry Clarke and the other farmer.

Mrs. Burridge “knows” Frank will not be back. She is not emotional about this moment because “she has been saying goodbye to him silently for years.” She moves back inside. At 51 years old and in pain, she realizes she cannot stay put in her home. In the days and weeks to come, she believes her isolated, well-stocked home will attract hungry people. They will fight over the land and food, but this is not a fight she wants any part in.

Mrs. Burridge begins packing, bringing along warm clothes, food, and the hidden shotgun. She considers killing the animals so that others will not do so incorrectly, but then remembers that she does not know how to do so herself; it was always Frank’s job. Instead, she opens the gates so that the animals can run free, although she suspects they won’t. Afterwards, she looks at the house one more time, which causes her to go inside and get a toothbrush. She does not take anything from the cellar, but she worries that those who come to the house will be wasteful. She even considers burning the house down, although she decides against it.

Mrs. Burridge thinks about what to do with the dogs. Eventually, she allows them to run free, although she does not let them come with her for fear that they will draw attention. She begins moving north, passing the family cemetery. She does not see anyone else around and worries she has done all of this for nothing. Eventually evening comes and Mrs. Burridge is weary. She knows the road she is on but is unfamiliar with the specific location. Soon she finds a stream and drinks from it before heading into a forest where she can avoid being seen. She plans on taking a break and eating while waiting for the moon to come out so she can go back to walking.

Here, fantasy begins to blend with reality. Atwood will occasionally drop in subtle clues such as grocery list items to hint that the forthcoming events are not real, but the narrative style becomes much more immediate. Notice that Mrs. Burridge is no longer thinking about what will happen; she imagines she is actually in an apocalyptic scenario. Crucially, she does not trust Frank—who comes off as rather heroic here—and instead lies to him about his gun. Instead, she acts selfishly because she believes she must in order to survive.



Although this moment is imagined, it once again speaks to the failure of Mrs. Burridge and Frank’s relationship. As she sends her husband to his death, she doesn’t shed a single tear and instead she focuses entirely on herself. In order to survive, Mrs. Burridge thinks she must be ruthless and expects others to do the same.



Even as she prepares to leave, Mrs. Burridge’s limitations are obvious. She has never killed an animal before and she is only able to take a limited amount of food. She also continues to worry about things that do not matter at all in this scenario, such as what will happen to her house once she is not there. Furthermore, although she seems more than willing to set off on her own, her reliance on common domestic comforts such as a toothbrush suggests that she is not prepared for what is to come.



Again, death is always on Mrs. Burridge’s mind, as the family cemetery manages to make it into her daydream. One indication that this scenario exists only in Mrs. Burridge’s mind is the fact that she never mentions her feet hurting (something that came up earlier in her normal, everyday routine), despite presumably walking for many miles.



Mrs. Burridge moves into the woods but quickly comes across two men at a fire. They see her and one starts moving in her direction. He smiles—which Mrs. Burridge takes as a threat—and says something, but Mrs. Burridge does not know what because “she does not know how people dressed like that would talk.” The men see her gun and Mrs. Burridge thinks they want to take it. When the men get closer, Mrs. Burridge decides that she must shoot them, otherwise she will die.

Mrs. Burridge knows she will have to fire the gun quickly but is worried about her ability to do so. She has never killed anything and is worried about “the loud noise or the burst of red that will follow.” She thinks about how it is impossible to know what her response will be until she actually pulls the trigger. Suddenly, the scene shifts back to Mrs. Burridge’s kitchen, and Mrs. Burridge is staring at her clock. She writes “Cheese” on her grocery list and then moves toward the kitchen door.

Before the first day is over, Mrs. Burridge is already in distress, which is not a good sign for someone who spends a lot of time preparing for such a scenario. Interestingly, Mrs. Burridge momentarily breaks the illusion of the daydream by admitting that she does not know how such men “would talk.” This implies that the two men are from somewhere else and are therefore extra threatening to Mrs. Burridge; it also clues readers into the fact that this scenario is a product of Mrs. Burridge’s imagination.



In this climactic moment, Mrs. Burridge realizes that such an event is not something she can plan for. Until this scenario occurs, she cannot know how she will react. Even so, the fact that she continues to stare at her clock suggests she will continue to fixate on the issue. Yet, she also must continue to live her ordinary, mundane life, and she does manage to finish her grocery list. Ultimately, the ending is ambiguous; although the apocalyptic scenario is clearly imagined, Mrs. Burridge’s feelings toward it are unresolved, and the fact that she returns to her accustomed spot at the kitchen door suggests that she will continue to dwell on apocalyptic scenarios like this one.





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