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# The Blind Assassin

Margaret Atwood

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THE  
BLIND  
ASSASSIN

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MARGARET  
ATWOOD



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Imagine the monarch Agha Mohammed Khan, who orders the entire population of the city of Kerman murdered or blinded – no exceptions. His praetorians set energetically to work. They line up the inhabitants, slice off the heads of the adults, gouge out the eyes of the children. . . . Later, processions of blinded children leave the city. Some, wandering around in the countryside, lose their way in the desert and die of thirst. Other groups reach inhabited settlements . . . singing songs about the extermination of the citizens of Kerman....

— RYSZARD KAPUŚCINIŃSKI

I swam, the sea was boundless, I saw no shore.  
Tanit was merciless, my prayers were answered.  
O you who drown in love, remember me.

—*INSCRIPTION ON A CARTHAGINIAN FUNERARY URN*

The word is a flame burning in a dark glass.

—*SHEILA WATSON*

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# Acclaim for Margaret Atwood's THE BLIND ASSASSIN

*Winner of the Booker Prize and the International Association of Crime Writers Dashiell Hammett Award*

“A literary high-wire act. . . . Big and ambitious. . . . A sweeping family saga.”

—*Newsweek*

“Brilliant.... Opulent.... Atwood is a poet . . . as well as a contriver of fiction, and scarcely a sentence of her quick, dry yet avid prose fails to do useful work, adding to a picture that becomes enormous.”

—John Updike, *The New Yorker*

“Bewitching. . . . A killer novel.... Atwood's crisp wit and steely realism are reminiscent of Edith Wharton. . . . A wonderfully complex narrative.”

—*The Christian Science Monitor*

“With [The Blind Assassin], Ms. Atwood offers added certification to her lofty position in world literature. . . . [It] is marked by lyrical writing and the intricacy of the narrative. The reader is repeatedly caught by surprise. . . . Almost to the last page, the book retains its sense of mystery.”

—Mel Gussow, *The New York Times*

“Chilling.... Lyrical.... [Atwood's] most ambitious work to date.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“Hauntingly powerful. . . . Margaret Atwood is one of the greatest writers alive. . . . [Her] style is tight, authoritative and as glittering and hard as a diamond. . . . *The Blind Assassin* is a novel of luminous prose, scalpel-precise insights and fierce characters.... Atwood's new work is so assured, so elegant and so incandescently intelligent, she casts her contemporaries in the shade.”

—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Expansive. . . . A tour de force.... [The Blind Assassin] is in the best tradition of gothic melodrama.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Ingenious.... Atwood performs a spectacular sleight of hand, fashioning a bewitching, brilliant layered story of how people see only what they wish to.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“You won’t be able to put it down.” —*New York Post*

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“Brilliant. . . . Bountiful. . . . Meticulously furnished with the clothing, cuisine and locutions of the period.... Capacious, audacious.”

—*San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*

“Vintage Atwood—furious, funny, brilliant and subversive. . . . Atwood achieves an almost impossible combination—a hall of mirrors, with cutting insights at every turn, cloaked in a dreamy, all-enveloping atmosphere that seduces the reader with every sentence. . . . Iris Chase Griffen is one of the most memorable in a long line of dangerous, driven Atwood women.... In *The Blind Assassin* [Atwood’s] talents are on full display.”

—*The Times-Picayune*

“Enthralling. . . . Unforgettable. . . . Iris Chase is a brilliant addition to Atwood’s roster of fascinating fictional narrators. Not only is her story sinuously complex, but she is entertaining company.”

—*Time*

“Complex and rich in period detail.... [A] stylish family saga.”

—*People*

“*The Blind Assassin* has enough mysteries to keep even a casual reader engaged. . . . There is a steely quality to Ms. Atwood’s writing that’s a bit scary but also exhilarating; no one gets away with anything.”

—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Rewarding. . . . Intricate. . . . Atwood continues to stretch the bounds of fictional technique.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“Sexy, readable, far-fetched, and intelligent.... Atwood brings style and substance together to make a beautiful plaster cast of all the proprieties and constrictions of the bourgeois colonial town that, in the decades after the war, British Toronto still was, and adds to it the vivid colors of human cruelty, love, and sin.”

—Vince Passaro, *Elle*

“An intricately structured, often poetically rendered novel that’s also graced by [Atwood’s] mordant wit. . . . So flush is *The Blind Assassin* with knowing, telling details, it’s almost possible to close the book feeling the author has again slipped the bonds to create a fiction more persuasive than reality.”

—*Daily News*

“Assured. . . . A harsh portrait of class warfare and sexual exploitation, a knowing satire of pu

fiction and literary cultism, and an unflinching meditation on the uses of art, all wrapped up with Atwood's customary aplomb."

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—*Chicago Sun-Times*

"Atwood's best novel to date.... It's a fair bet that *The Blind Assassin* will join that list of novels that stand beyond the reach of criticism."

—*The Denver Post*

"*The Blind Assassin* is by far the most intricately plotted of Atwood's novels to date, a puzzle designed to beguile the reader much as the tales of Scheherazade beguiled King Shahryar."

—*The Oregonian*

"Intricate, haunting.... *The Blind Assassin* . . . is the kind of story so full of intrigue and desperation that you take it to bed with you simply because you can't bear to put it down. . . . Atwood has achieved an astonishing feat. It's one thing to write an accomplished novel; it's another entirely to spin a tale so brilliantly that the reader internalizes it."

—*Harper's Bazaar*

"Entirely convincing.... Atwood is wonderfully perceptive."

—*The Economist*

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I



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## *The bridge*

Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge. The bridge was being repaired, she went right through the Danger sign. The car fell a hundred feet into the ravine, smashing through the treetops feathery with new leaves, then burst into flames and rolled down into the shallow creek to the bottom. Chunks of the bridge fell on top of it. Nothing much was left of her but charred smithereens.

I was informed of the accident by a policeman: the car was mine, and they'd traced the licence. His tone was respectful: no doubt he recognized Richard's name. He said the tires may have caught on streetcar track or the brakes may have failed, but he also felt bound to inform me that two witnesses – a retired lawyer and a bank teller, dependable people – had claimed to have seen the whole thing. They'd said Laura had turned the car sharply and deliberately, and had plunged off the bridge with no more fuss than stepping off a curb. They'd noticed her hands on the wheel because of the white gloves she'd been wearing.

It wasn't the brakes, I thought. She had her reasons. Not that they were ever the same as anybody else's reasons. She was completely ruthless in that way.

"I suppose you want someone to identify her," I said. "I'll come down as soon as I can." I could hear the calmness of my own voice, as if from a distance. In reality I could barely get the words out of my mouth; my mouth was numb, my entire face was rigid with pain. I felt as if I'd been to the dentist. I was furious with Laura for what she'd done, but also with the policeman for implying that she'd done it. A hot wind was blowing around my head, the strands of my hair lifting and swirling in it, like ink spilled in water.

"I'm afraid there will be an inquest, Mrs. Griffen," he said.

"Naturally," I said. "But it was an accident. My sister was never a good driver."

I could picture the smooth oval of Laura's face, her neatly pinned chignon, the dress she would have been wearing: a shirtwaist with a small rounded collar, in a sober colour – navy blue or steel grey or hospital-corridor green. Penitential colours – less like something she'd chosen to put on than like something she'd been locked up in. Her solemn half-smile; the amazed lift of her eyebrows, as if she were admiring the view.

The white gloves: a Pontius Pilate gesture. She was washing her hands of me. Of all of us.

What had she been thinking of as the car sailed off the bridge, then hung suspended in the afternoon sunlight, glinting like a dragonfly for that one instant of held breath before the plummet? Of Alex, of Richard, of bad faith, of our father and his wreckage; of God, perhaps, and her fatal, triangular bargain. Or of the stack of cheap school exercise books that she must have hidden that very morning in the bureau drawer where I kept my stockings, knowing I would be the one to find them.

When the policeman had gone I went upstairs to change. To visit the morgue I would need gloves and a hat with a veil. ~~Something to cover the eyes. There might be reporters. I would have to call a taxi.~~ Also I ought to warn Richard, at his office: he would wish to have a statement of grief prepared. I went into my dressing room: I would need black, and a handkerchief.

I opened the drawer, I saw the notebooks. I undid the crisscross of kitchen string that tied them together. I noticed that my teeth were chattering, and that I was cold all over. I must be in shock, I decided.

What I remembered then was Reenie, from when we were little. It was Reenie who'd done the bandaging, of scrapes and cuts and minor injuries: Mother might be resting, or doing good deeds elsewhere, but Reenie was always there. She'd scoop us up and sit us on the white enamel kitchen table, alongside the pie dough she was rolling out or the chicken she was cutting up or the fish she was gutting, and give us a lump of brown sugar to get us to close our mouths. *Tell me where it hurts*, she would say. Stop howling. Just calm down and show me where.

But some people can't tell where it hurts. They can't calm down. They can't ever stop howling.

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## *The Toronto Star, May 26, 1945*

### QUESTIONS RAISED IN CITY DEATH SPECIAL TO THE STAR

A coroner's inquest has returned a verdict of accidental death in last week's St. Clair Ave. fatality. Miss Laura Chase, 25, was travelling west on the afternoon of May 18 when her car swerved through the barriers protecting a repair site on the bridge and crashed into the ravine below, catching fire. Miss Chase was killed instantly. Her sister, Mrs. Richard E. Griffen, wife of the prominent manufacturer, gave evidence that Miss Chase suffered from severe headaches affecting her vision. In reply to questioning, she denied any possibility of intoxication as Miss Chase did not drink.

It was the police view that a tire caught in an exposed streetcar track was a contributing factor. Questions were raised as to the adequacy of safety precautions taken by the City, but after expert testimony by City engineer Gordon Perkins these were dismissed.

The accident has occasioned renewed protests over the state of the streetcar tracks on this stretch of roadway. Mr. Herb T. Jolliffe, representing local ratepayers, told *Star* reporters that this was not the first mishap caused by neglected tracks. City Council should take note.

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*The Blind Assassin. By Laura Chase. Reingold, Jaynes & Moreau, New York, 1947*

*Prologue: Perennials for the Rock Garden*

She has a single photograph of him. She tucked it into a brown envelope on which she'd written *clippings*, and hid the envelope between the pages of *Perennials for the Rock Garden*, where no one else would ever look.

She's preserved this photo carefully, because it's almost all she has left of him. It's black and white, taken by one of those boxy, cumbersome flash cameras from before the war, with the accordion-pleat nozzles and their well-made leather cases that looked like muzzles, with straps and intricate buckles. The photo is of the two of them together, her and this man, on a picnic. *Picnic* written on the back, in pencil – not his name or hers, just *picnic*. She knows the names, she doesn't need to write them down.

They're sitting under a tree; it might have been an apple tree; she didn't notice the tree much at the time. She's wearing a white blouse with the sleeves rolled to the elbow and a wide skirt tucked around her knees. There must have been a breeze, because of the way the shirt is blowing up against her; perhaps it wasn't blowing, perhaps it was clinging; perhaps it was hot. It was hot. Holding her hand over the picture, she can still feel the heat coming up from it, like the heat from a sun-warmed stone at midnight.

The man is wearing a light-coloured hat, angled down on his head and partially shading his face. His face appears to be more darkly tanned than hers. She's turned half towards him, and smiling, in a way she can't remember smiling at anyone since. She seems very young in the picture, too young though she hadn't considered herself too young at the time. He's smiling too – the whiteness of his teeth shows up like a scratched match flaring – but he's holding up his hand, as if to fend her off in play, or else to protect himself from the camera, from the person who must be there, taking the picture; or else to protect himself from those in the future who might be looking at him, who might be looking in at him through this square, lighted window of glazed paper. As if to protect himself from her. As if to protect her. In his outstretched, protecting hand there's the stub end of a cigarette.

She retrieves the brown envelope when she's alone, and slides the photo out from among the newspaper clippings. She lays it flat on the table and stares down into it, as if she's peering into a well or pool – searching beyond her own reflection for something else, something she must have dropped or lost, out of reach but still visible, shimmering like a jewel on sand. She examines every detail. Her fingers bleached by the flash or the sun's glare; the folds of their clothing; the leaves of the tree, and the small round shapes hanging there – were they apples, after all? The coarse grass in the foreground. The grass was yellow then because the weather had been dry.

Over to one side – you wouldn't see it at first – there's a hand, cut by the margin, scissored off

the wrist, resting on the grass as if discarded. Left to its own devices.

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The trace of blown cloud in the brilliant sky, like ice cream smudged on chrome. His smoke-stained fingers. The distant glint of water. All drowned now.

Drowned, but shining.

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## II



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## *The Blind Assassin: The hard-boiled egg*

What will it be, then? he says. Dinner jackets and romance, or shipwrecks on a barren coast? You can have your pick: jungles, tropical islands, mountains. Or another dimension of space – that's what I'm best at.

Another dimension of space? Oh really!

Don't scoff, it's a useful address. Anything you like can happen there. Spaceships and skin-tight uniforms, ray guns, Martians with the bodies of giant squids, that sort of thing.

You choose, she says. You're the professional. How about a desert? I've always wanted to visit one. With an oasis, of course. Some date palms might be nice. She's tearing the crust off her sandwich. She doesn't like the crusts.

Not much scope, with deserts. Not many features, unless you add some tombs. Then you could have a pack of nude women who've been dead for three thousand years, with lithe, curvaceous figures, ruby-red lips, azure hair in a foam of tumbled curls, and eyes like snake-filled pits. But I don't think you could fob those off on you. Lurid isn't your style.

You never know. I might like them.

I doubt it. They're for the huddled masses. Popular on the covers though – they'll write all over you. If your fellow, they have to be beaten off with rifle butts.

Could I have another dimension of space, and also the tombs and the dead women, please?

That's a tall order, but I'll see what I can do. I could throw in some sacrificial virgins as well, with metal breastplates and silver ankle chains and diaphanous vestments. And a pack of ravening wolves extra.

I can see you'll stop at nothing.

You want the dinner jackets instead? Cruise ships, white linen, wrist-kissing and hypocritical slop?

No. All right. Do what you think is best.

Cigarette?

She shakes her head for no. He lights his own, striking the match on his thumbnail.

You'll set fire to yourself, she says.

I never have yet.

She looks at his rolled-up shirt sleeve, white or a pale blue, then his wrist, the browner skin of his hand. ~~He throws out radiance, it must be reflected sun. Why isn't everyone staring?~~ Still, he's too noticeable to be out here – out in the open. There are other people around, sitting on the grass or lying on it, propped on one elbow – other picnickers, in their pale summer clothing. It's all very proper. Nevertheless she feels that the two of them are alone; as if the apple tree they're sitting under is not a tree but a tent; as if there's a line drawn around them with chalk. Inside this line, they're invisible.

Space it is, then, he says. With tombs and virgins and wolves – but on the instalment plan. Agreed?

The instalment plan?

You know, like furniture.

She laughs.

No, I'm serious. You can't skimp, it might take days. We'll have to meet again.

She hesitates. All right, she says. If I can. If I can arrange it.

Good, he says. Now I have to think. He keeps his voice casual. Too much urgency might put her off.

On the Planet of – let's see. Not Saturn, it's too close. On the Planet Zycron, located in another dimension of space, there's a rubble-strewn plain. To the north is the ocean, which is violet in colour. To the west is a range of mountains, said to be roamed after sunset by the voracious undead female inhabitants of the crumbling tombs located there. You see, I've put the tombs in right off the bat.

That's very conscientious of you, she says.

I stick to my bargains. To the south is a burning waste of sand, and to the east are several steep valleys that might once have been rivers.

I suppose there are canals, like Mars?

Oh, canals, and all sorts of things. Abundant traces of an ancient and once highly developed civilization, though this region is now only sparsely inhabited by roaming bands of primitive nomads. In the middle of the plain is a large mound of stones. The land around is arid, with a few scrubby bushes. Not exactly a desert, but close enough. Is there a cheese sandwich left?

She rummages in the paper bag. No, she says, but there's a hard-boiled egg. She's never been this happy before. Everything is fresh again, still to be enacted.

Just what the doctor ordered, he says. A bottle of lemonade, a hard-boiled egg, and Thou. He rolls the egg between his palms, cracking the shell, then peeling it away. She watches his mouth, the jaw, the teeth.

Beside me singing in the public park, she says. Here's the salt for it.

Thanks. You remembered everything.

~~This arid plain isn't claimed by anyone, he continues. Or rather it's claimed by five different tribes, none strong enough to annihilate the others. All of them wander past this stone heap from time to time, herding their *thulks* – blue sheep-like creatures with vicious tempers – or transporting merchandise of little value on their pack animals, a sort of three-eyed camel.~~

The pile of stones is called, in their various languages, The Haunt of Flying Snakes, The Heap of Rubble, The Abode of Howling Mothers, The Door of Oblivion, and The Pit of Gnawed Bones. Each tribe tells a similar story about it. Underneath the rocks, they say, a king is buried – a king without a name. Not only the king, but the remains of the magnificent city this king once ruled. The city was destroyed in a battle, and the king was captured and hanged from a date palm as a sign of triumph. At moonrise he was cut down and buried, and the stones were piled up to mark the spot. As for the other inhabitants of the city, they were all killed. Butchered – men, women, children, babies, even the pack animals. Put to the sword, hacked to pieces. No living thing was spared.

That's horrible.

Stick a shovel into the ground almost anywhere and some horrible thing or other will come to light. Good for the trade, we thrive on bones; without them there'd be no stories. Any more lemonade?

No, she says. We've drunk it all up. Go on.

The real name of the city was erased from memory by the conquerors, and this is why – say the tale-tellers – the place is now known only by the name of its own destruction. The pile of stones that marks both an act of deliberate remembrance, and an act of deliberate forgetting. They're fond of that paradox in that region. Each of the five tribes claims to have been the victorious attacker. Each recalls the slaughter with relish. Each believes it was ordained by their own god as righteous vengeance because of the unholy practices carried on in the city. Evil must be cleansed with blood, they say. Clean that day the blood ran like water, so afterwards it must have been very clean.

Every herdsman or merchant who passes adds a stone to the heap. It's an old custom – you do it in remembrance of the dead, your own dead – but since no one knows who the dead under the pile of stones really were, they all leave their stones on the off chance. They'll get around it by telling you that what happened there must have been the will of their god, and thus by leaving a stone they are honouring this will.

There's also a story that claims the city wasn't really destroyed at all. Instead, through a charm known only to the King, the city and its inhabitants were whisked away and replaced by phantoms of themselves, and it was only these phantoms that were burnt and slaughtered. The real city was shrunk to very small and placed in a cave beneath the great heap of stones. Everything that was once there is there still, including the palaces and the gardens filled with trees and flowers; including the people, no bigger than ants, but going about their lives as before – wearing their tiny clothes, giving their tiny banquets, telling their tiny stories, singing their tiny songs.

The King knows what's happened and it gives him nightmares, but the rest of them don't know. They don't know they've become so small. They don't know they're supposed to be dead. They don't

even know they've been saved. To them the ceiling of rock looks like a sky: light comes in through a pinhole between the stones, and they think it's the sun.

---

The leaves of the apple tree rustle. She looks up at the sky, then at her watch. I'm cold, she says. I'm also late. Could you dispose of the evidence? She gathers eggshells, twists up wax paper.

No hurry, surely? It's not cold here.

There's a breeze coming through from the water, she says. The wind must have changed. She leans forward, moving to stand up.

Don't go yet, he says, too quickly.

I have to. They'll be looking for me. If I'm overdue, they'll want to know where I've been.

She smooths her skirt down, wraps her arms around herself, turns away, the small green apple watching her like eyes.

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## *The Globe and Mail, June 4, 1947*

### GRIFFEN FOUND IN SAILBOAT SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

After an unexplained absence of several days, the body of industrialist Richard E. Griffen, forty-seven, said to have been favoured for the Progressive Conservative candidacy in the Toronto riding of St. David's, was discovered near his summer residence of "Avilion" in Port Ticonderoga, where he was vacationing. Mr. Griffen was found in his sailboat, the *Water Nixie*, which was tied up at his private jetty on the Jogues River. He had apparently suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. Police report that no foul play is suspected.

Mr. Griffen had a distinguished career as the head of a commercial empire that embraced many areas including textiles, garments and light manufacturing, and was commended for his efforts supplying Allied troops with uniform parts and weapons components during the war. He was a frequent guest at the influential gatherings held at the Pugwash home of industrialist Cyrus Eaton and a leading figure of both the Empire Club and the Granite Club. He was a keen golfer and a well-known figure at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club. The Prime Minister, reached by telephone at his private estate of "Kingsmere," commented, "Mr. Griffen was one of this country's most able men. His loss will be deeply felt."

Mr. Griffen was the brother-in-law of the late Laura Chase, who made her posthumous debut as a novelist this spring, and is survived by his sister Mrs. Winifred (Griffen) Prior, the noted socialite, and by his wife, Mrs. Iris (Chase) Griffen, as well as by his ten-year-old daughter Aimee. The funeral will be held in Toronto at the Church of St. Simon the Apostle on Wednesday.

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