

# The Blind Assassin



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa and spent much of her childhood in rural Quebec for her father's job. As a child, she was a voracious reader and began writing poems and plays of her own at the age of six. After graduating from high school, Atwood earned a BA in English from Victoria College in the University of Toronto followed by an MA from Radcliffe College, the women's college that was part of Harvard University. Atwood began a PhD at Radcliffe but left after two years without finishing the degree. She married the writer Jim Polk in 1968 and divorced him five years later, beginning a relationship with another writer, Graeme Gibson, which lasted until Gibson's death in 2019. She and Gibson have one daughter, Eleanor, born in 1976. Atwood's first book was a poetry pamphlet entitled *Double Persephone*, published in 1961. Throughout the 1960s, '70s, and '80s Atwood taught at various universities while writing. Some of her most famous books were published in the 1980s, including [The Handmaid's Tale](#) in 1985 and [Cat's Eye](#) in 1988. The popularity of [The Handmaid's Tale](#) in particular is a significant reason behind Atwood's global fame. In 2019, she published a sequel to [The Handmaid's Tale](#) entitled [The Testaments](#). It was a joint winner of the Booker Prize that year.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As a historical novel set across the entirety of the 20th century, *The Blind Assassin* covers many important historical events. The most significant of these are the growth of industrial production and mass manufacturing in Canada, World War I, the rise of communism, the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II. Aside from these major events, the novel also traces more subtle historical shifts, most notably relating to the changing status and rights of women. Iris notes that, at the turn of the 20th century, women had little agency of their own. Anything they owned was technically the property of their father or husband, and they often didn't have much choice in who they married. Furthermore, female artists and writers (like Iris) often found that their work was treated dismissively. As the book shows, things changed as a result of the feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s. Among other things, this movement fought for women's right to exist independently of marriage and championed the work of neglected female authors, which is why feminist scholars show such interest in the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

One of the most striking aspects of *The Blind Assassin* is the fact that it contains several stories within the overall narrative, which in turn allow it to cover a span of multiple historical periods (including an invented science-fictional dimension of the universe). In this light, the book is similar to David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. The use of another novel embedded within the main (frame) narrative also recalls Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*, which contains similar meditations on the nature of reading, stories, and truth. *The Blind Assassin's* connection between mystery, narrative construction, and truth is also an important feature of Renee Gladman's *Ravicka* series, made up of the four novels *Event Factory*, *The Ravickians*, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, and *House of Ravicka*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Blind Assassin
- **Where Written:** Toronto, Ontario, Canada
- **When Published:** 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction; Science Fiction; Frame Story
- **Setting:** Port Ticonderoga, a fictional town near Toronto, across the span of the 20th century; Toronto; Sakiel-Norn, a city on the fictional planet Zycron
- **Climax:** Iris reveals that she, not Laura, actually wrote *The Blind Assassin* (a book of the same name as Atwood's novel).
- **Antagonist:** Richard Griffen
- **Point of View:** First Person; Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Rejecting Labels.** Although Atwood's work is considered by many to be prime examples of both feminist literature and science fiction, she has famously balked at applying both of these terms to her writing, preferring "social realism" and "speculative fiction."

**Odd One Out.** Atwood's novels are frequently adapted—[The Handmaid's Tale](#), for example, has been turned into a play, a musical, an opera, a film, and a graphic novel—but thus far, *The Blind Assassin* has never been adapted.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Shortly after the end of World War II, Iris Chase's sister Laura drives off a bridge in Port Ticonderoga, Canada. A newspaper article announcing Laura's death describes it as an accident, but Iris believes that it was a suicide. Prior to Laura's death, she

wrote a book called **The Blind Assassin**, which was published posthumously in 1947. In the book's prologue, an unnamed man and woman sit at a picnic together, smiling. In the next passage of Laura's book, the man tells the woman a story about an alien planet called Zycron.

Another newspaper article details the death of Richard E. Griffen, a prominent manufacturer and Iris's husband, one month after Laura's suicide. He died in a boat under mysterious circumstances and he's survived by Iris, his sister Winifred, and his 10-year-old daughter Aimee.

Meanwhile, the man in *The Blind Assassin* tells the woman about **Sakiel-Norn**, a city on Zycron that has a strictly segregated caste system. In *The Blind Assassin*, the man tells the woman about how enslaved children on Sakiel-Norn are forced to make carpets until they go blind, at which point they are sold into brothels. Those who manage to escape become hired assassins. The city also practices human sacrifice, although most of its inhabitants have lost their religious faith.

Another newspaper article announces the death of Aimee, Richard and Iris's daughter and 4-year-old Sabrina's mother. Aimee was a drug user; she neglected Sabrina, who is now in her great-aunt Winifred's care.

In the 1870s, Iris's grandfather Benjamin builds a button factory in Port Ticonderoga, Canada. Benjamin marries Adelia, a woman from an "established" Montreal family that is running out of money. The couple has three sons: Edgar, Percival, and Norval. Adelia dies of cancer in 1913; just before this, a young woman named Reenie begins working in Benjamin and Adelia's home, **Avilion**, as a nursemaid and housekeeper. Norval, Iris's father, proposes to her mother, Liliana, at an ice-skating party. Liliana is a serious, deeply religious person who dedicates her life to helping the less fortunate.

Iris is born in 1916, during the World War I. Within the same month, both Edgar and Percival are killed in the war. When Norval returns home to Canada, he has lost his religious faith and he develops a drinking problem. In 1919, Laura is born. Five years later, Liliana becomes pregnant again. One day, she collapses in the kitchen, suffers a miscarriage, and passes away a few days later. Before dying, Liliana asks Iris to promise to take care of Laura. A few years later, when the Great Depression arrives, Norval gets involved with the relief effort, which leads Richard Griffen to publicly criticize him in the press. Across Canada, violence erupts between striking workers and the authorities.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the man keeps telling the story of Zycron, describing a girl who is about to be sacrificed and a blind assassin who is hired to kill her as part of a plot to overthrow the King of Sakiel-Norn.

Back in the main narrative, a strike and lockout takes place at Norval's button factory. As children, Iris and Laura spend a lot of time alone together running around Avilion. Norval begins

dating a 28-year-old bohemian sculptor named Callista Fitzsimmons, who goes by Callie. At this time, Iris and Laura are tutored by an older unmarried woman they nickname Miss Violence, then by a man named Mr. Erskine who molests Laura. However, when Laura tells Iris this, Iris doesn't believe her. The Depression forces life at Avilion to become more austere. On the annual Labour Day celebration thrown by Chase and Sons, Laura introduces Iris to a friend she's made, a young union organizer and writer named Alex Thomas. The editor of the local newspaper, Elwood Murray, takes a picture of the three of them sitting together. When Reenie sees the girls sitting with Alex, she chastises them. However, Laura has already invited Alex to dinner; Richard and Winifred are coming too.

Laura pretends to be interested in photography in order to steal the negative of the photograph of her, Alex, and Iris. Meanwhile, squeezed by the Depression, Norval reluctantly announces that the button factory will temporarily close. This infuriates the workers, who call for a solidarity strike which turns into a riot. The button factory is burned down; effigies of Norval, Laura, and Iris are burned; and local businesses not taking part in the strike are smashed. Alex is accused of being one of the instigators, and in the aftermath, Laura secretly hides him in the attic of Avilion. When Iris finds out about this she is initially angry, but then she agrees to join Laura in helping to hide Alex. One day, Iris goes up to the attic without Laura, and Alex kisses her. Shortly after, Iris, Laura, and Alex decide the time is right to sneak Alex out to freedom. After he goes, Iris gets the sense that Laura loves him, though she doesn't admit it outright.

Laura spends more and more time helping with the church's relief effort. Norval tells Iris that Richard is going to propose to her, and he pressures her to accept in order to save the button factory and secure Laura's future. They do get engaged, and afterward Winifred takes Iris for lunch and begins her efforts to shape Iris into a proper society woman. The night before the wedding, Laura begs Iris not to marry Richard.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the woman brings money and supplies to the man, who has been hiding out in different apartments. He keeps telling the woman the story about Zycron, explaining how the blind assassin prepared to kill the girl about to be sacrificed, but how he ended up falling in love with her instead. The girl and the blind assassin escape Sakiel-Norn just as a rival tribe are about to attack the city. On another occasion, while waiting for the woman, the man constructs a more trashy, salacious science-fiction story—the kind he sells to make money.

In the present, Iris (now an elderly woman) tries to contact her lawyer, Mr. Sykes, to write her will. She knows that after she dies, Reenie's daughter Myra will probably sort through her belongings. Back in the 1930s, Iris and Richard go on honeymoon. When they return to Canada, Iris learns that Norval died while she was away and that Richard deliberately

hid the telegrams informing her of this fact. Because Laura is still only 15, she comes to live with Richard and Iris in Toronto, where she is enrolled in a private school called St. Cecilia's. Laura runs away, however; Richard and Iris find her working at a waffle booth at an amusement park and they bring her home.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the man ends the story of the blind assassin and the girl by having them be eaten by wolves. The woman is horrified by this grim ending. Later, they meet again at a restaurant. The man informs the woman that he is about to leave the country (it's implied that he's going to fight in the Spanish Civil War). The woman promises to leave her husband for him when he comes back, but the man asks her to do it now. The woman says that she can't because she wouldn't have any money to survive.

In the 30's, Richard plans a run for political office. Laura is expelled from St. Cecilia's for being disruptive, questioning the Bible, and faking doctor's appointments to skip school. Laura protests that she doesn't want or need to be in school at all. Iris, Laura, Richard, and Winifred go to London on vacation, then New York, followed by Avilion. When they get to Port Ticonderoga, Richard informs them that he fired Reenie after Laura came to live with them in Toronto. Winifred mentions that Callie was recently arrested at a communist party and that Richard bailed her out. While Laura and Iris are alone, Laura brings up Mr. Erskine and the fact that Iris never believed that he was molesting her. By the time Laura turns 17, Winifred is growing desperate to marry her off. Around this time, Iris becomes pregnant. Shortly after, Richard and Winifred inform Iris that they sent Laura to a mental institution called BellaVista because she was claiming to be pregnant herself, which they believe is a sign she was hysterically jealous of Iris. They do not permit Iris to communicate with Laura.

In the present, the elderly Iris recalls going to see Aimee for the last time before Aimee died. Aimee is drunk and high, and she claims that Laura is her real mother and that her father is the man from *The Blind Assassin*. Frightened, Iris runs away. After Aimee dies, Winifred manages to win custody of Sabrina despite Iris's best efforts to the contrary.

Back in the 1930s, Laura runs away from BellaVista, and Iris goes to see Reenie in Port Ticonderoga. Reenie tells Iris that Laura doesn't want Iris to know where she is, but that she left a message for Iris before she was taken away. Iris manages to find the message, which is in the form of Laura painting over the pictures in Iris's wedding album—but she struggles to understand what it means.

In *The Blind Assassin*, the man and woman meet in a cheap and grimy hotel. The man tells the woman about the Spanish Civil War, and then he mentions that a new war is about to begin. The woman makes a plan to leave her husband and live independently while waiting for the war to end. However, this never ends up happening—before long, she receives a telegram

informing her that the man has been killed.

Laura calls Iris in May 1945, a week after World War II ends. They meet at a café, and Laura explains that she really was pregnant and that Richard and Winifred forced her to get an abortion at BellaVista. When Iris asks who the father was, Laura replies, "If you don't already know, I don't think I can tell you." Laura indicates that Richard blackmailed her by threatening to harm Alex while he was in hiding, and Laura went along with it to protect him. Iris reveals that Alex was killed in the war and that she'd been having an affair with him. In response, Laura steals Iris's handbag and car keys and drives away in her car. The next day, a police officer informs Iris that Laura drove the car off a bridge and died.

After Laura's death, Iris finds Laura's notebooks in her stocking. Reading them, she realizes that Richard had been raping Laura for years. She packs up her and Aimee's things and leaves Richard a letter saying she knows what he did to Laura and that she never wants to see him again. She goes back to Port Ticonderoga, where she and Aimee proceed to lead a live a quiet life. In 1947, she publishes *The Blind Assassin* under Laura's name. The scandal that ensues ends Richard's political career, and when he calls to tell Iris this, she tells him that Laura had been having an affair with Alex. Shortly after, Richard kills himself, although Winifred makes sure it looks like an accident. Winifred then manages to gain custody of Sabrina.

At this point, Iris reveals that it was she—not Laura—who wrote *The Blind Assassin*, although there is an extent to which they wrote it together. Iris has written a second manuscript (the narrative of her and Laura's life) in order to set the record straight, saying she wrote it for Sabrina.

Iris dies in May 1999. Shortly after, Sabrina comes back from living in India to sort through her grandmother's belongings. Iris always dreamed that Sabrina would come before her death and that she would be able to tell Sabrina her story in person.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Iris Chase Griffen** – Iris is the main character and narrator of the book. Born in 1916 to Norval and Liliana Chase, Iris is Laura's elder sister. Her childhood in Port Ticonderoga is mostly happy, although blighted by the death of Liliana. As a teenager, Iris marries Richard Griffen in order to help save Norval's business and to financially secure Laura's future, although she doesn't like Richard very much. During her marriage, she has an affair with a union organizer named Alex Thomas. Although Iris's daughter Aimee is believed by most people in the novel to be Richard's child, her real father is Alex. After Laura kills herself as a young woman and Iris learns that Richard had been raping Laura throughout their marriage, Iris leaves Richard and moves from Toronto back to Port

Ticonderoga, where she leads a largely quiet life. The only exception to this is when she publishes a novel she wrote about her affair with Alex, **The Blind Assassin**, but does so under Laura's name. As an elderly woman, Iris writes another manuscript in order to convey the truth to her granddaughter Sabrina, and this narrative is the main content of Atwood's novel. Although Iris is the book's central character, the reader never actually gains much sense of her personality, which mostly comes through via its contrast to Laura's distinct, headstrong, and idealistic nature. Unlike Laura, Iris is a more ordinary, cautious, and practical young woman without an especially strong sense of justice. As an elderly woman, Iris is haunted by the wrongs she committed—particularly those related to her ignorance about Richard's abuse of Laura—and she attempts to right these wrongs through the act of writing.

**Laura Chase** – Laura is Iris's younger sister and Norval and Liliana's second daughter. Laura is presented as the author of **The Blind Assassin** for much of the story, though it's ultimately revealed that Iris wrote the book based on her own experiences and published it under Laura's name. Laura is a complicated character defined by contradictions: simultaneously anxious yet bold, childish yet altruistic, deeply religious yet prone to questioning everything about her faith. She gravitates toward strong, absolutist ways of thinking and is constantly curious, yet she never flourishes in an academic environment. There are hints throughout the novel that Laura has psychological issues surrounding food—although it's never specified whether she has an eating disorder, she often skips meals and is described as being very thin. As a child, Laura is molested by her and Iris's tutor, Mr. Erskine, though Iris doesn't believe Laura when she confesses this. Laura eventually befriends a union organizer Alex Thomas, whom she hides him in the attic at **Avilion** after the riots at Norval's button factory. Throughout the novel, it seems as if Laura is in love with Alex, although she never admits this out loud. As a teenager, Laura becomes increasingly rebellious, running away from home and faking doctor's appointments so that she can skip school. This is likely related to the fact that Richard rapes Laura repeatedly after she comes to live with him and Iris, manipulating her by threatening to harm Alex if she doesn't have sex with him. Richard and Winifred ultimately take Laura to a mental institution, BellaVista, where—she eventually reveals—she's forced to have an abortion. She runs away and lives independently for a number of years. However, when Iris reveals that Alex was killed in World War II (and that she was having an affair with him before the war), Laura kills herself by driving Iris's car off a bridge.

**Alex Thomas** – Alex is a union organizer and science-fiction writer whom Laura befriends at the Labour Day picnic put on by her father, Norval's, button factory. She later hides Alex in the **Avilion** attic after he is implicated in the button factory riot. Alex is an orphan; he believes his parents were killed during

World War I, although he doesn't know this for sure. However, rather than lamenting the lack of information he has about his past, he embraces the opportunity to invent himself and become his own person. Alex is seemingly a communist, and he volunteers to fight in the Spanish Civil War. He also has an affair with Iris while she's married to Richard—although this isn't represented in the main narrative, it is documented in **The Blind Assassin**, the book published under Laura's name that was actually written by Iris. (In this novel, Alex is represented by the unnamed man.) Alex is an idealist with strong political views, yet—at least according to how he is depicted in *The Blind Assassin*—he sometimes treats Iris in a cruel, slightly misogynistic way. It's revealed at the end of the novel that Alex, not Richard, Iris's daughter Aimee's true biological father.

**Richard Griffen** – Richard is a wealthy and powerful textiles manufacturer who marries Iris, having promised that he will save Norval's button factory and secure Laura's future—both of which he violates. Richard is a selfish, cruel, greedy man who's seemingly obsessed with his own power. He favors right-wing economic policies, advocates harsh treatment of workers during the Great Depression, and is sympathetic to the Nazi regime. He treats Iris with cruelty—for example, he deliberately conceals the news that Norval died during their honeymoon, and he prevents her from communicating with Laura after he institutionalizes Laura in the BellaVista clinic. Indeed, Richard's treatment of Laura conveys his most evil side: he rapes Laura by threatening to harm Alex Thomas (whom Laura is in love with) if she doesn't have sex with him, and he forces Laura to have an abortion when she becomes pregnant. Nevertheless, Richard seems to believe that he genuinely loves Laura. Once the scandal caused by **The Blind Assassin** (Iris's book published under Laura's name) ruins Richard's political ambitions and Iris falsely claims that Laura was having an affair with Alex, Richard kills himself.

**Reenie** – Reenie is Iris and Laura's nursemaid and the housekeeper at **Avilion**. Overall, she serves as a kind of mother figure to Iris and Laura, particularly after the death of their biological mother, Liliana. At the beginning of the novel, Reenie is presented as a rather conservative figure: she regularly chastises Iris and Laura when their behavior falls short of the strict standards of respectability. Despite being from a working-class background herself, Reenie also aligns herself with the class position of her employers, the Chase family, when the workers in Port Ticonderoga begin striking and rioting during the Great Depression. Indeed, Reenie is deeply loyal, and as the novel progresses she shows a more rebellious side, helping Laura run away from Richard and sleep in Avilion after she has nowhere else to go. Particularly after both of Iris's parents die, Iris longs for Reenie as the only person she trusts to take care of her. Reenie eventually marries Ron Hincks and has a daughter, Myra. Reenie dies from kidney failure.

**Captain Norval Chase** – Norval is Iris and Laura's father and

Liliana's husband. He inherits the family button factory from his father Benjamin after Norval's two older brothers, Edgar and Percival, are killed in World War I. Norval is traumatized by his own experiences fighting in the war; upon returning home, he loses his religious faith and develops a severe drinking problem. Overall, Norval is presented as being a reasonably fair employer and he participates in the relief efforts during the Great Depression. When he is forced to close the button factory, he becomes even more depressed than previously and he ends up drinking himself to death.

**Man** – The man is a main character, along with the woman, in Iris's book [The Blind Assassin](#). He's based on Alex Thomas, with whom Iris has an affair while she's married to Richard. The man is a science-fiction writer and union organizer on the run from unspecified authorities. He moves from place to place but eventually grows to distrust the friends who have been sheltering him, fearing that they are going to betray him. When the Spanish Civil War begins, he volunteers to fight. He ends up being killed in World War II.

**Woman** – The woman is a main character, along with the man, in Iris's book [The Blind Assassin](#). At the beginning the novel, the reader is led to assume she is based on Iris's sister Laura, but over the course of the narrative it becomes clear that she is actually based on Iris. The woman is wealthy, married, and has lived a somewhat sheltered life—yet at the same time, she's willing to spend time in the dingy apartments and hotels where the man stays while on the run without complaint. She's eager to listen to the man read his science-fiction stories aloud, and she also brings the man supplies, such as scotch, cigarettes, and money when she visits. The woman is clearly devoted to the man, and she's devastated when he's killed overseas in the Spanish Civil War.

**Winifred Griffen Prior** – Winifred is Richard's younger sister and a full-time socialite. Like her brother, Winifred is a cruel, power-obsessed person who helps systematically destroys the lives of Iris and Laura Chase. Her last name and the fact that she goes by "Mrs." indicate that she was once married, although her husband is never mentioned. Winifred tries to mold Iris in her own image, taking her on as a "protégé," and she's disappointed when Iris doesn't turn out to be the society woman Winifred dreamed of. Over time, this disappointment turns to bitterness and rage, and Winifred acts in a crueler and crueler way toward both Iris and Laura. She helps cover up Richard's rape and impregnation of Laura, sending Laura to the BellaVista clinic against her will. Decades later, after Iris and Richard's daughter Aimee dies, Winifred successfully fights Iris for custody of Aimee's daughter Sabrina—not because she actually wants to raise Sabrina, but purely out of spite.

**Sabrina Griffen** – Sabrina is Iris's estranged granddaughter. Sabrina is only four years old when her mother, Aimee, dies in an incident that may or may not have been suicide. Before that, she was neglected due to Aimee's substance abuse issues.

Aimee never reveals who Sabrina's father is, and Sabrina's great-aunt Winifred becomes her guardian after Aimee's death. Sabrina runs away from Winifred's home several times as a teenager and she ends up going to live in India, where she engages in charity work. After Iris dies, Sabrina returns to Port Ticonderoga to sort through her grandmother's belongings. The manuscript Iris writes—which is the main narrative of Atwood's novel—is addressed to Sabrina.

**Aimee Adelia Griffen** – Aimee is Iris's daughter. Everyone believes that she is Richard's child, but in fact her father is Alex. Richard and Aimee's aunt Laura both commit suicide while Aimee is a child, events that have a profound impact on her. Following Richard's death, Aimee's great-aunt Winifred wins custody of her, a turn of events that further traumatizes Aimee. As a result of all this pain, Aimee develops a drug and alcohol addiction. She has a child, Sabrina, whom she neglects, and she becomes estranged from the rest of her family. She falsely believes that Laura is her real mother and that her father is the man from [The Blind Assassin](#) (although she doesn't know who this man is). She dies at the age of 38 in what may or may not be a suicide, after which Winifred wins custody of Sabrina.

**Liliana Chase** – Liliana is Benjamin's wife and Iris and Laura's mother. A very religious person, she dedicates her life to helping the less fortunate. She almost dies giving birth to Laura, and so she's advised not to get pregnant again. However, she does, and this pregnancy results in a miscarriage which kills her while Iris and Laura are still children.

**Adelia Montfort Chase** – Adelia is Iris and Laura's paternal grandmother; Benjamin's wife; and Norval, Percival, and Edgar's mother. Born into a genteel French-English Montreal family, Adelia marries Benjamin in order to save her own family's declining financial fortunes. She is a woman of lofty tastes and ambitions who dreams of a glamorous life of adventure, travel, and culture. However, these ambitions are curtailed by her much simpler-minded husband who prefers to stay in Port Ticonderoga and watch over his prosperous button factory. Adelia is known for her good taste; she's the person who oversees the construction of [Avilion](#), the family estate. Although Adelia dies of cancer in 1913, three years before Iris is born, Iris feels that she grows up in her grandmother's shadow and she feels pressured to live up to the ideal of proper womanhood that Adelia believed in so passionately.

**Benjamin Chase** – Benjamin is Iris and Laura's paternal grandfather; Adelia's husband; and Norval, Percival, and Edgar's father. The descendant of Puritan immigrants to Pennsylvania, Benjamin opens a button factory in the 1870s and soon grows wealthy as a result. He is a rather simple man who marries Adelia for her class status and good taste. Benjamin is horrified when Percival and Edgar are killed in World War I and he suffers a stroke around the time he learns of their deaths.

**Callista (Callie) Fitzsimmons** – Callie is a 28-year-old professional sculptor and bohemian whom Norval dates after Liliana's death. Callie is independent and bohemian, representing a more progressive vision of womanhood than Iris has ever seen before. For this reason, Iris idolizes her. Callie is also a communist (or a communist sympathizer) who is friends with Alex—but she potentially betrays him to Richard after Richard bails her out of jail.

**Girl** – In the man's science-fiction story, the girl is raised to be sacrificed in a religious ritual in **Sakiel-Norn**. As is customary of human sacrifices in the city, she is mute after having her tongue cut out. The blind assassin is hired to kill the girl, but he falls in love with her and they escape the city together. However, they're eaten by wolves shortly after.

**Blind Assassin** – In the man's science-fiction story, the blind assassin is a formerly-enslaved Ygnirod boy who goes blind from making luxury carpets. He is then sold into a brothel but manages to escape, becoming known as the best blind assassin in **Sakiel-Norn**. He is hired to kill the girl as part of a plot to topple the King of Sakiel-Norn, but ends up falling in love with her instead. The two escape the city but end up being eaten by wolves.

**Miss Violence** – Miss Violence is Iris and Laura's tutor ("Miss Violence" is a nickname the girls give her; her real name is Violet Goreham). Because she is fairly old and unmarried, Reenie calls her an "old maid." She is an emotional, wistful person with romantic notions. The girls come to like her and they're sad when she leaves.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Myra Sturgess** – Myra is Reenie and Ron's daughter and the elderly Iris's only friend. Myra is a caring person but something of a busybody, and Iris finds Myra irritating despite how much she does for Iris. When Iris dies, Myra writes a loving obituary for her in the local paper.

**Walter Sturgess** – Walter is Myra's husband, a working-class handyman who lives in Port Ticonderoga. He takes care of Iris in her old age, and Iris sometimes fantasizes about being with him romantically.

**Mr. Erskine** – Mr. Erskine is Iris and Laura's second, much stricter tutor after Miss Violence. He uses corporal punishment and he even sexually molests Laura. After Laura tells Reenie this, Reenie gets him fired by pretending to find pornography in his room.

**Elwood Murray** – Elwood is the editor of the local newspaper in Port Ticonderoga when Iris and Laura are growing up. He is disliked by the townspeople for being nosy, but also for being gay (or at least being perceived to be gay). He is killed in World War II.

**Mr. Sykes** – Mr. Sykes is the elderly Iris's lawyer.

**Ron Hincks** – Ron is Reenie's husband and Myra's father.

**Edgar Chase** – Edgar is Norval and Percival's brother who, like Percival, is killed in World War I.

**Percival Chase** – Percival is Norval's and Edgar's brother who, like Edgar, is also killed in World War I.

**Lord of the Underworld** – In the man's science-fiction story, a courtesan in **Sakiel-Norn** pays to dress up as the Lord of the Underworld and rape the girl before she is sacrificed. This plan ends up being thwarted by the blind assassin.

**Servant of Rejoicing** – In the man's science-fiction story, the Servant of Rejoicing is the leader of the People of Joy, a tribe of "barbarians" who attack and destroy **Sakiel-Norn**.

**King of Sakiel-Norn** – The King is the despotic leader of **Sakiel-Norn** who dies when the city is attacked by the People of Joy.

**Mrs. Hillcoate** – Mrs. Hillcoate is the laundrywoman at **Avilion**.

**Mr. Murgatroyd** – Mr. Murgatroyd is a servant employed by Richard in Toronto.

**Mrs. Murgatroyd** – Mrs. Murgatroyd is a servant employed by Richard in Toronto.

**Headmistress** – The headmistress oversees Laura's first school in Toronto, St. Cecilia's.

**Dr. Witherspoon** – Dr. Witherspoon is the director of the BellaVista clinic, where Laura is confined against her will and forced to undergo an abortion.

**Will** – Will is a character in the man's story about the utopian planet Aa'A.

**Boyd** – Boyd is a character in the man's story about the utopian planet Aa'A.



## 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.



### STORYTELLING, NARRATIVE, AND TRUTH

*The Blind Assassin* contains several stories embedded within one another. The main narrative, which is told from the perspective of Iris Chase Griffen, also contains excerpts from a novel supposedly written by Iris's dead sister, Laura (although it is eventually revealed that the novel was actually written by Iris). This novel, like Atwood's book, is called **The Blind Assassin**. There are then references to yet another narrative within Iris's novel *The Blind Assassin*, a science-fiction story written by the unnamed man who is one of

that novel's main characters. This structure is known as *mise-en-abyme*, a phrase that refers to the placement of multiple stories inside one another in a repeated, mirroring pattern. Atwood uses this structural technique to add complexity to the main narrative, suggesting that any single story could be told in multiple different ways. Moreover, the use of other narratives draws attention to the act of storytelling itself, showing how storytelling inevitably involves some manipulation of the truth. The novel's many references to writing and storytelling are examples of metafiction, a term that describes instances in which fiction contains references to the act of producing fiction. Of the multiple layers of interconnected stories within the novel, none is fully reliable; in each of them, the truth is represented (or manipulated) in a slightly different way. Through these nested stories, Atwood suggests that the truth is not necessarily fixed—it contains conflicting layers and interpretations, just like the novel itself.

At the outset of the book, the reader might be inclined to trust that the account provided by Iris is the full truth. However, by placing conflicting narratives within the main story and playing with questions of how (and by whom) these narratives are constructed, Atwood encourages the reader to be skeptical about the idea that any single narrative contains the truth. The most obvious way that the novel casts doubt on the trustworthiness of narratives is simply by featuring so many different narratives within it, each written from different perspectives and telling conflicting stories. For example, the book is peppered with newspaper articles that provide accounts of some of the most important events in the narrative, including the deaths of Iris's husband Richard, her daughter Aimee, and her sister Laura. Yet while newspapers are supposed to contain neutral, objective, and factually-accurate descriptions of reality, the reader immediately learns that this is not actually the case. In the newspaper article describing Laura's death, the article suggests that the crash was an accident, caused either by a tire getting caught on a streetcar track or by headaches that impaired Laura's vision. However, just before this article, Iris indicates that she thinks Laura's death was a suicide: "It wasn't the brakes, I thought. She had her reasons." In this case, the newspaper provides the false account, whereas Iris's own narrative contains what the novel suggests is most likely to be the truth due to the fact that she knew Laura better than anyone else. Yet at the same time, the fact that no one can really know for sure what was going through Laura's head before the crash reminds the reader that the full truth is often difficult to access and that people must settle for conflicting accounts that may or may not contain elements of truth.

Further, the book complicates the notion of truthful storytelling through the novel that Laura supposedly writes, *The Blind Assassin*. This novel within Atwood's novel of the same name is a *roman-à-clef*, meaning that it reflects reality (or, at

least, the reality of the main narrative) in a coded way. It appears in fragments interspersed with the main narrative of the novel, and the reader must therefore read carefully in order to interpret how they think the events of Laura's novel map onto those of the main narrative. For example, the fact that the Laura's novel tells the story of a clandestine love affair between a wealthy woman and a political radical/science-fiction writer seems to indicate that Laura herself had an affair with the real-life Alex Thomas, who obviously resembles the unnamed male character in the novel. Yet as time goes on, hints surface that Laura isn't actually the author of *The Blind Assassin*—Iris is. This means that it was *Iris*, not Laura, who was actually having the affair. Through this, Atwood suggests that while narrative can provide clues about the truth, these clues are often false, misleading, or subject to misinterpretation.

At the same time, the novel doesn't simply suggest that storytelling's inherent subjectivity is what obscures the full truth within narratives. Indeed, when Iris reveals that she, not Laura, is the true writer of *The Blind Assassin*, she explains that this doesn't mean that Laura had no input: "I can't say Laura didn't write a word. Technically that's accurate, but in another sense—what Laura would have called the spiritual sense—you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers." The final sentence of this quotation indicates that stories have a kind of life of their own, even if they are a product of an individual person's memories and imagination. Both Iris and Laura participated in writing *The Blind Assassin* because both of them lived the events that inspired the novel. This idea is further conveyed by the lack of quotation marks across the entire narrative, which often make it somewhat unclear whose view is being expressed. Iris may be the actual writer of the novel(s) the reader encounters, but that doesn't mean she wrote them alone. Truth, then, is not a single objective reality but a woven fabric made up of many different people's subjective accounts.

Atwood extends this idea by suggesting that subjectivity can be seen as a kind of truth even when that subjectivity is unreliable, as is the case with Iris's memories. In the same passage in which Iris reveals she is the author of *The Blind Assassin*, she writes, "I didn't think of what I was doing as writing—just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth." By casting both subjective memories and imagination as "the truth," Iris encourages the reader to let go of the idea that there is any one fixed "truth" and instead to embrace the concept that the truth is made of multiple, sometimes contradictory, layers.



### DOOMED LOVE

Although *The Blind Assassin* combines elements of science fiction, crime novel, and murder mystery, the book could be read primarily as a love story.

Like most literary love stories, it does not describe an easy,

happy, and secure union between two people, but rather illuminates the ways in which love is doomed and thwarted by issues such as conservative social norms, sexism, marital infidelity, and separation due to war and death. The main couple whose story of doomed love is told in the novel is Alex and Iris, who are represented in fictional form in Iris's novel **The Blind Assassin** as the unnamed man and woman. The love between these two characters is doomed because they come from different social classes; because Iris (the woman) is married; and because Alex (the man) is constantly on the run after being implicated in strikes and riots that took place at Iris's father, Norval's, button factory. At the same time, Alex and Iris are far from the only doomed lovers in the novel, which is so filled with stories of tragic romance that it implies such relationships are the norm, not the exception.

The central love story between Alex and Iris is thwarted by many different factors, which together indicate that the society in which the two of them live is not conducive to people following their hearts and achieving happiness through love. The first problem is that Iris is already married to a cruel and powerful man named Richard Griffen. For a woman to have an affair at all is deeply scandalous in the conservative, pre-WWII Canadian culture in which the novel is set. Yet the fact that Iris's husband is a wealthy businessman who plans to run for political office, while Alex is a poor communist, magnifies the scandal greatly. The novel emphasizes that it is this system of social norms and hierarchies that dooms romantic love.

Indeed, the idea that the novel is set in a world where romantic love is actively prevented from flourishing is further conveyed by the juxtaposition between Iris's marriage to Richard and her affair with Alex. Iris never liked Richard—but following the decline of Norval's button factories, Iris knows that marrying him will provide her family much-needed financial security and upgraded social status. Richard purchases the button factories from Norval, and Iris's marriage to Richard essentially becomes an extension of Richard and Norval's business arrangement. While Norval seemingly allows Iris to choose whether she wants to marry Richard, he pressures her into accepting Richard's proposal by saying, "A certain amount depends on it," emphasizing that Iris needs to not only protect her own "future" but that of her sister Laura, too. (The irony of this statement emerges in the fact that, later in the novel, Iris discovers that Richard raped Laura repeatedly throughout his marriage to Iris and he even forced Laura to have an abortion.) Iris's marriage to Richard has nothing to do with love—rather, it is rather a transaction designed to protect her family's financial "future." In contrast, the love between Iris and Alex is passionate and authentic, produced by respect for each other and similarities between them, particularly their mutual love of storytelling. Alex is not only penniless but a political radical, and for this reason he would never be allowed to marry Iris (even if it weren't for the fact that she is already married). Again, this

shows how the social norms and hierarchies of the society in which Iris and Alex live doom romantic love.

Iris is far from the only person in the story stuck in a loveless marriage: this is a repeated pattern, which shows how societal pressures have long thwarted romantic love. Iris's grandmother Adelia, for example, came from an "established" family that lacked money, which led her to marry Iris's grandfather Benjamin. Telling this story to Iris, the Chase family's housekeeper Reenie explains, "She wasn't married, she was married off [...] The family arranged it. That's what was done in such families, and who's to say it was any worse or better than choosing for yourself?" While Reenie may be ambivalent about the issue of arranged marriages, her comment that "that's what was done in such families" suggests that this practice was widespread at the time. The novel itself strongly suggests that such arrangements obstruct true love from flourishing. Benjamin marries Adelia because she is from an esteemed family and has good taste, whereas Adelia herself has essentially no choice in the matter. Although their marriage is not as miserable as Iris's union with Richard, there is still no real love or passion present within it, again suggesting that social obligations tend to stand in the way of people achieving genuine, fulfilling romantic relationships.

Through Adelia's story, the novel also investigates how sexism in particular thwarts women's ability to access real love. When Iris was a young teenager, she used to "romanticize Adelia" and dream about her grandmother having a secret lover. However, once Iris gets older, she realizes that this fantasy is impossibly unrealistic: "In reality the chances of Adelia having had a lover were nil. The town was too small, its morals were too provincial, she had too far to fall. She wasn't a fool." Unlike men—who have more independence and more of a public life—women have fewer opportunities to meet people and would be subject to far greater scandal if their affairs were discovered. Of course, one could argue that Iris's certainty that Adelia could not have had a lover is misplaced, or even ironic, considering that Iris herself is in the same social position and she still manages to have an affair. Yet this in itself emphasizes the impossibility of her relationship with Alex, a relationship that—while it did exist—was always doomed to fail. While Iris's assertion that there was zero chance Adelia could have had a lover may have been a slight exaggeration, the general point that sexism prevented women from having any agency in their romantic lives still stands. Furthermore, the tragic nature of Iris's own affair further emphasizes the novel's main point that—at least in the world in which it is set—love is doomed to fail.



### OPPRESSION VS. RESISTANCE

The world in which *The Blind Assassin* is set is stricken with inequality and oppression: economic exploitation, social class divisions, and sexism.

While the novel's main focus is on the forms of oppression that

exist in small-town Canada in the 1930s and '40s, where most of the narrative is set, these forms of oppression are highlighted via their connection to the science-fiction story composed by the unnamed man in Iris's novel, **The Blind Assassin**. In this story, which is set in a city called **Sakiel-Norn** on a planet named Zycron, there are two classes: the Ygniroids, who are "smallholders, serfs, and slaves," and the elite Snilfards. The oppression and exploitation on Sakiel-Norn may initially appear more extreme than anything that exists on Earth; however, through interspersing stories of Zycron with the main narrative, Atwood suggests that there are actually more similarities than one might initially assume. The novel's exploration of oppression is rather bleak and the acts of resistance that take place within it are almost all squashed. Ultimately, Atwood argues that while the will to resist is difficult to quash entirely, it is rarely possible to overpower the larger and more powerful forces of oppression.

The lives of both Iris and Laura provide the novel's main examples of gender-based oppression, as well as instances of resistance to sexism (albeit ones that usually backfire or fail). Starting from when the sisters are both young, their lives are highly controlled and they have little independence. As Iris and Laura grow older, they both find that their agency is restricted by men—particularly by Richard, whom Iris and Laura's father, Norval, pressures Iris to marry after the family's button business fails. As the wife of a wealthy and powerful businessman, Iris finds herself having to subscribe to extremely strict social rules and expectations. Even worse, Iris married Richard in part because Norval told her that it would help protect Laura from the perils of financial ruin and degraded social status in the future. Yet, soon after the marriage, Richard betrays his promise to help Norval's business, and later in life, Iris discovers that Richard raped Laura repeatedly over many years and that he forced Laura to have an abortion when she became pregnant. While the restrictions placed on Iris are bad enough, Laura's fate at the hands of Richard conveys the most gruesome side of gender-based oppression.

Both Laura and Iris perform acts of resistance to the oppression they face, but ultimately this is not enough to overpower the forces that restrict them. The most important among these is their decision to hide the union organizer Alex Thomas in their attic after the riot triggered by workers at the button factory. In doing so, they violate not only the expectations placed on them as women, but also as members of the upper class—they are supposed to protect their own interests rather than sympathize with a "known subversive and radical" like Alex. This makes the girls feel free, empowered, and in control for the first time in their lives. Yet however transformative the decision to shelter Alex is on the sisters' personal lives, it is ultimately powerless against the larger forces of oppression acting on them. Moreover, Iris's second major act of resistance is not as courageous as it could have

been, as it rests on a falsehood. She publishes her novel, *The Blind Assassin*, despite knowing it will provoke scandal due to the fact that it depicts a secret affair between an unmarried man and woman. However, this triumphant act is mitigated by the fact that Iris publishes the novel under Laura's name—and Laura, by that point, is already dead. This helps Iris evade the consequences of the scandal by implying that it was the unmarried Laura, rather than the married Iris, who had an affair with Alex. Iris's act of resistance is therefore not as powerful as it otherwise would be.

The oppression and resistance that take place in the main section of the narrative are contrasted against that depicted by the man in his science-fiction story. To some readers, it may seem as if the oppression that takes place in Sakiel-Norn is far worse than anything that occurs in Iris and Laura's hometown of Port Ticonderoga, Canada. In this alien city, the lowest class of Ygniroids are enslaved. Ygniroid children are forced to make carpets until they go blind, and the elite Snilfards boast about how many children were killed in the making of their carpets: "This carpet blinded ten children [...] This blinded fifteen, this twenty." Yet while this oppression that takes place within the man's story might seem extreme, the novel also hints at the similarities between this science-fictional world and pre-war Canada. For example, fact that the enslaved Ygniroid children make carpets is significant, as in the main narrative, both Norval and Richard build their wealth by owning factories in the textile industry. Furthermore, in both societies, upper-class women are subject to particular codes of behavior that do not apply to the lower classes. Snilfard women, for example, cover their faces, while it is illegal for Ygniroids to do the same. Meanwhile, Iris finds that after she marries Richard, she experiences increased scrutiny over her behavior and she feels pressured follow unstated rules as to what she can and can't do. Walking around Toronto, she thinks, "In theory I could go wherever I liked, in practice there were invisible barriers."

The similarities between Canada and Sakiel-Norn make sense given that the man who writes the science-fiction story is a radical leftist. The man emphasizes that the Ygniroids want to rebel, but—like Iris and Laura—these aliens struggle to overcome the powerful forces oppressing them: "The Ygniroids were resentful of their lot in life, but concealed this with a pretense of stupidity. Once in a while they would stage a revolt, which would then be ruthlessly suppressed." While the desire to resist may be an inevitable result of oppression, the novel suggests that the suppression of resistance is an even greater guarantee.



## VIOLENCE AND DEATH

*The Blind Assassin* could be classified a crime or mystery novel: it opens with a series of deaths, the central one of which—Laura's—is shrouded in mystery. As in a typical crime novel, the truth about Laura's fate

is slowly revealed with several unexpected twists. However, while the book does conclude with a sense of clarity about what happened to Laura and why, it deviates from the conventions of a crime novel by not providing a sense of resolution or catharsis at the end. This is because Laura's death is not presented as a unique, anomalous event in the novel, but rather the product of a world totally saturated in violence and death. (Indeed, given the portrayal of the hyper-violent alien city of **Sakiel-Norn** in the story-within-the-story of Iris's novel, **The Blind Assassin**, it is not just one world but multiple worlds that Atwood portrays as disturbingly violent.) While Laura's death does create a sense of mystery that drives the narrative forward, the fact that her death occurred is itself not a remarkable event. Indeed, Atwood's portrayal of death in the novel instead suggests that it is a natural product of humanity's appetite for needless destruction and the culture of pervasive violence that ensues.

The three deaths that open the novel and the mystery surrounding them convey the human desire to find meaning in violence and death, even if—as the book ultimately shows—this desire is usually fruitless. Unlike in a conventional crime novel, all three of these deaths are self-inflicted. Most importantly, two of them are direct or indirect responses to existing violence. Laura kills herself after Alex Thomas, the union organizer whom she helped shelter and whom she seemed to secretly be in love with, is killed in World War II. Meanwhile, Iris's daughter Aimee develops drug and alcohol addiction in part due to growing up around so much violence—including the years in which her father, Richard, raped her aunt Laura, the abortion Richard forced Laura to get, and the suicides of Richard and Laura. In this sense, the novel implies that violence and death do not contain much meaning because they are pervasive and cyclical: the prevalence of violence and death only leads to more violence and death.

World Wars I and II also play a significant role in emphasizing the image of a world saturated in violence. Like so many men, Iris's father, Norval, returns from World War I traumatized by the violence and death he witnessed there and the deaths of his two brothers in the conflict. He becomes an atheist and refuses to believe that there was any point to the death and suffering of millions caused by the war. This leads him to develop a drinking problem and to become estranged from his wife, Liliana. Reflecting on her parents' relationship, Iris observes, "Do I mean to say he didn't love her? Not at all. He loved her; in some ways he was devoted to her. But he couldn't reach her, and it was the same on her side. It was as if they'd drunk some fatal potion that would keep them forever apart, even though they lived in the same house, ate at the same table, slept in the same bed." This illuminates the idea that violence and death destroy people and relationships not only by literally harming and killing people, but also by destroying people's happiness, hope, and ability to connect with one another. The fact that the horrors of World War I are so closely followed by those of the World War

II (in which Alex dies) further conveys the pervasive, inescapable nature of violence and death.

Meanwhile, the notably gruesome violence that characterizes the science-fiction short story about the invented planet Zycron further illustrates this sense of pervasive, inescapable violence while conveying the idea that the impulse toward violence, death, and destruction is somehow inevitably embedded within humanity. The unnamed man who tells the story explains that there are humans on Zycron because the Zycronites colonized Earth 8,000 years before the 20th century, which means that contemporary inhabitants of Earth are descended from Zycronite "stragglers." The man's descriptions of Zycron are of a planet infused with horrifying violence. Describing the eponymous "blind assassins"—child slaves turned into killers—he says, "Those of them who escaped [the brothels] took up the profession of cutting throats in the dark, and were greatly in demand as hired assassins [...] They were considered to be without pity. They were much feared." Again, this quotation creates a sense of pervasive, senseless, brutal violence, while also suggesting that the impulse toward violence and destruction is fundamental to humanity. Even on another planet, a prehistoric version of humans relentlessly destroy each other—and although people may try to seek meaning in the mysteries of violence and death, the novel ultimately suggests that there is no meaning to be found.



## EMULATION, REPETITION, AND IDENTITY

Due to the structure of having multiple stories nested within the main narrative, *The Blind Assassin* is filled with emulation and the repetition of identity. Two of the central characters in the main narrative, Iris Chase Griffen and Alex Thomas, have fictional equivalents (the unnamed man and woman) in Iris's novel, **The Blind Assassin**, creating a sense of repeated identity. Furthermore, by pretending that it was her sister Laura who wrote *The Blind Assassin*, Iris creates the sense of fluidity between her and her sister's identity. This fluidity is highlighted in a much more sinister manner by the fact that while Richard is married to Iris, he rapes and impregnates Laura. However, despite the sometimes horrifying ways in which individuals are linked and identity is shown to be fluid via repetition and emulation, the book also portrays this kind of repetition in a positive light through Iris's granddaughter Sabrina, who resembles Laura but who enjoys a much freer life than her great-aunt. Thus, the novel ultimately suggests that there can be something moving or even hopeful about the way in which identity is repeated and emulated across different people.

Atwood uses the multiple stories within the main narrative to challenge the notion that any of the characters are self-contained and unique. The novel Iris's writes, which is also named *The Blind Assassin*, tells the story of two lovers who

mostly aren't identified by name, but rather only the pronouns "he" and "she." While it becomes clear that the male character represents Alex Thomas—the science-fiction writer and political radical whom Laura and Iris hide in their attic following the riot at their father's button factory—the female character's identity is more ambiguous. For a while, the novel hints that the woman is Laura, based on the fact that Laura supposedly wrote *The Blind Assassin* and thus she was assumedly the one having an affair with Alex. Yet eventually the truth is revealed that both the author of the novel and the female character are actually Iris. The ambiguity of the female character's identity and the sense of interchangeability of the two sisters helps emphasize the novel's blurring of individual identities. Rather than distinct, self-contained individuals, each person could be considered a composite of those around them.

Beyond this blurring of identities, Atwood also suggests that families create a similar repetition of identities and fates. Iris and Laura are, after all, sisters, which is part of what makes them interchangeable in certain contexts. Yet this is far from the only example of repetition occurring within the family. Iris describes her grandmother Adelia, who died before she was born: "Laura and I were brought up by her. We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren't. As she was dead by then, we couldn't argue." Despite the fact that Iris and Laura never even meet Adelia, their upbringing is still shaped by her; they grow up *inside* Adelia's identity and in the midst of pressures to resemble her (which, according to Iris, they fail to do). Similarly, Iris describes repetition and (unconscious) emulation between Laura and Iris's granddaughter Sabrina, who have an uncanny resemblance despite the fact that Laura died before Sabrina was born. Iris claims that Sabrina "takes after Laura in that respect: the same tendency towards absolutism, the same refusal to compromise, the same scorn for the grosser human failings." Thus, it's clear that individuals are not wholly unique—rather, they inevitably emulate fundamental qualities from their family members, both dead and alive.

The repetition and fluidity of identity across different members of a family can be harmful, but the book suggests that in another light, it can actually be a source of hope in tragic circumstances. The fact that Iris and Laura feel pressured to emulate Adelia's identity is largely a negative thing—it means they have to conform to strict social codes and are afforded little agency of their own. Similarly, Iris notes that Adelia's own identity was produced by emulating her genteel family; like the rest of the Montforts, her life was focused on "good taste" and style. Yet the similarities between Laura and Sabrina are more hopeful. Laura's own life was characterized by other people restricting her freedom and actively harming her, and she was never able to achieve a sense of independence, agency, and fulfillment. Sabrina, meanwhile, manages to free herself from

her family and travel to India, where she devotes herself to feeding the hungry—precisely the kind of project that Laura, who volunteered in the relief effort during the Great Depression, would have loved to pursue. This sends the hopeful message that although people tend to emulate those they're close to (whether by blood relation or by physical proximity) across generations, individuals still have the agency to make their own choices and create better lives for themselves.



## SYMBOLS

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



### THE BLIND ASSASSIN

*The Blind Assassin* symbolizes the impossibility of objective truth. With the same title as Atwood's novel, *The Blind Assassin* is a book within the story that's posthumously published under Laura Chase's name, which the reader eventually comes to learn is actually written by Laura's sister Iris. The novel is a *roman-à-clef*, meaning that it represents another (true) story but can only be understood with the correct "key" or frame of interpretation. For much of the narrative, then, the reader is led to believe that it tells the story of the upper-class Laura's affair with communist union organizer and science-fiction writer Alex Thomas. However, it is eventually revealed that this interpretation is wrong and that the novel is actually the story of *Iris's* extramarital affair with Alex.

In this way, as a book that is both factual at its core yet full of fictional abstractions and published under a false name, *The Blind Assassin* represents the fluidity of truth. Though Iris is the true author of the book, she claims, "I can't say Laura didn't write a word. Technically that's accurate, but in another sense—what Laura would have called the spiritual sense—you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers." This notion that a creative work like *The Blind Assassin* is greater than the sum of its parts suggests that an overall meaningful story is more important than the rigid fact it does or does contain—and perhaps that there are even different *kinds* of truth, like "the spiritual sense" that Iris alludes to. Ultimately, then, *The Blind Assassin* symbolizes the futility and impossibility of searching for a singular, objective reality.



### SAKIEL-NORN

Sakiel-Norn, the fictional alien city on the planet Zycron in the science-fiction story that the man in *The Blind Assassin* tells his female lover, symbolizes the horrors and violence inherent to human society. Sakiel-Norn is

a brutally hierarchical, oppressive, and violent place. At first it might seem as if Sakiel-Norn is notably separate from the human world—after all, it is part of an invented alien planet with its own language, religion, caste system, and cultural practices that have no direct translation to societies on Earth. Indeed, the woman in *The Blind Assassin* regularly objects that the city and the story the man tells about it is too violent, indicating that she believes it is more horrifying than the reality of life on Earth. However, over the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that the woman's objections are rooted in the naïveté that has resulted from the sheltered life she's led as the upper-class daughter of a manufacturer (and later the wife of an even wealthier manufacturer).

The truth is that all the horrors that take place on Sakiel-Norn actually do correspond to what exists in human society, even if this connection is obscured by the science-fiction setting. The slavery, racism, violence, rape, labor exploitation, and murder that take place on Sakiel-Norn are all part of human history, too. Indeed, the connection between Zycron and Earth is solidified when the man explains that, in the world of the story, humans are descended from Zycronites, meaning that the beings who live in Sakiel-Norn are not aliens, but human. In this sense, Sakiel-Norn represents the violence and brutality that is an integral part of human existence, yet it also reflects how people can deny the reality of this brutality due to their own ignorance and naïveté.



## AVILION

Avilion, the large, austere house in which Iris and Laura Chase are raised, symbolizes the rigid social expectations placed on them as children of a wealthy manufacturer. It also represents the estrangement and trauma of their family, which is itself a kind of doomed love. The house was designed by Iris and Laura's grandmother Adelia, a high-society woman from Montreal who prided herself on her good taste. Although Adelia dies before Iris and Laura are born, thanks to growing up in Avilion they feel as if they are raised by her. As Iris writes, "And so Laura and I were brought up by her. We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren't." In this way, the house represents both Adelia herself—and, more specifically, Adelia's class position, expectations, and tastes. She seems to spiritually inhabit or haunt the house even after her death, influencing Iris and Laura despite the fact that they never met her. They feel the pressure to emulate her in a way that shows how identity can be passed between people (even those who have no direct contact).

Yet Avilion's ultimate fate also indicates the limits of such emulation and influence. Following the fall in fortune of the Chase family, the house is sold and becomes a nursing home called Valhalla (in Norse mythology, Valhalla is the resting place

of those who die in war). The home is particularly bleak and thus comes to represent the fall from grace of the Chase family—particularly Iris, who is in the only member of her family present to witness Avilion in its new state following Laura and Aimee's deaths and Sabrina's estrangement.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor edition of *The Blind Assassin* published in 2001.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

●● 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 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 at him through the square, lighted window of glazed paper. As if to protect himself from her. As if to protect her.

**Related Characters:** Laura Chase, Iris Chase Griffen, Man, Woman

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 4-5

### Explanation and Analysis

Iris Chase Griffen has described her sister Laura's suicide in 1945—a suicide that was framed as an accident when it was reported in the newspaper. After this, the book switches to an extract from Laura's novel *The Blind Assassin*, published posthumously in 1947. The passage describes a woman who is looking at the only picture she has left of herself and a man—a man who was presumably her lover, although this isn't spelled out explicitly. In this lyrical quotation, the woman analyzes the photograph, comparing how she felt at the time it was taken to her current feelings. She tries to access the truth of how the man was feeling when it was taken.

As such, this quotation provides an important reflection on the act of narration, particularly narrating from one's own personal history. Despite the fact that the woman was actually there when the photograph was taken, there is still much about the scene it depicts that remains a mystery to

her. She is uncertain about the man's feelings—and even about her own, to a degree. Part of this uncertainty is triggered by the difference in her current perspective and how she felt at the time, illustrated by her comments on her own misplaced precociousness (“she hadn't considered herself too young at the time”). The quotation is also a significant meditation on the mysterious nature of love, which involves a range of conflicting and contradictory emotions.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ The Ygniroids were resentful of their lot in life, but concealed this with the pretense of stupidity. Once in a while they would stage a revolt, which would then be ruthlessly suppressed. The lowest among them were slaves, who could be bought and traded and also killed at will. They were prohibited by law from reading, but had secret codes that they scratched in the dirt with stones. The Snilfards harnessed them to ploughs.

**Related Characters:** Man (speaker), Woman

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 16

### Explanation and Analysis

The novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, portrays two lovers: an unnamed man and woman. The man has started telling the woman a story in his genre of expertise, science fiction. The story is set on the planet Zycron and the (now destroyed) city of Sakiel-Norn, where inhabitants are divided into two classes: the elite Snilfards and the subjugated Ygniroids. In this passage, the man narrating the story describes the brutal oppression of the Ygniroids, including their attempts at resistance. There are a few important things to note about this passage and what it conveys about the man's political orientation.

Firstly, the passage emphasizes that although the Ygniroids make themselves seem foolish and complacent, in reality they are deeply unsatisfied with their suffering and routinely try and revolt. This reflects the idea that just because a group of people does not overtly show signs of resistance does not mean that they accept their own subjugation and mistreatment. Secondly, the treatment of the enslaved Ygniroids—and particularly the creative ways in which they bypass the rule prohibiting them from

reading—has an important parallel with the history of slavery on Earth, such as the enslavement of African people in the Americas. While Zycron may be an invented, alien planet, it is more similar to Earth than the reader might initially assume.

☞ The carpets were woven by slaves who were invariably children, because only the fingers of children were small enough for such intricate work. But the incessant close labour demanded of these children caused them to go blind by the age of eight or nine, and their blindness was the measure by which the carpet-sellers valued and extolled their merchandise: *This carpet blinded ten children*, they would say. *This blinded fifteen, this twenty.*

**Related Characters:** Man (speaker), Richard Griffen, Iris Chase Griffen, Woman

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

In the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, the man continues to tell the woman his science-fiction story set in the alien city of Sakiel-Norn. He explains that the city is a major trading site that specializes in luxury textiles. Enslaved Ygniroid children produce delicate carpets that need to be woven by small fingers, and this work in turn leads the children to go blind. In this passage, the man explains that carpet-sellers boast about how many children were blinded in making a given carpet, indicating that this is a sign of increased value. Again, this quotation is important for conveying the man's political views and illuminating the similarities between Sakiel-Norn and human society.

While on Earth it might not be common to directly boast about how many workers were exploited and harmed in making a product, humanity does employ similarly exploitative systems of production. This is particularly relevant because in the main narrative, Iris's husband, Richard, is a textiles manufacturer who treats his workers poorly and opposes any attempts by the working class to attain more rights or better working conditions. In this way, Sakiel-Norn serves as a kind of parallel—albeit it a somewhat dramatized one—to industry on Earth. Thus, it enables the man to explain his political views (the man is implied to be a communist or at least a communist

sympathizer) to the woman by expressing an underlying truth about humanity through an abstracted (and arguably more engaging) fictional story.

“I tell you the stories I’m good at, he says. Also the ones you’ll believe. You wouldn’t believe sweet nothings, would you?”

No. I wouldn’t believe them.

**Related Characters:** Woman, Man (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 23

### Explanation and Analysis

In the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, the man continues to tell the woman his science-fiction story set in the alien city of Sakiel-Norn. He’s told her about the enslaved Ygnirod children who are blinded in the process of weaving carpets and how, after the children go blind, they’re sold into brothels—but that some escape and become hired as the titular “blind assassins.” The woman interrupts the man to tell him that the story he is telling is too sad and, in this quotation, the man replies that he chooses to tell the stories he’s skilled at, plus the ones he thinks the woman will believe. This is an intriguing and in some ways contradictory statement. As a science fiction writer, the man is skilled at inventing stories set in faraway, alien worlds—so why would these be the stories that the woman believes?

Given the overall context of the quote, what the man really means by “stories I’m good at” and “ones you’ll believe” is that he deliberately tells sad stories. Not only this, but he constructs these sad stories because he believes they reflect the sadness of the world. This is an important message in a book that generally refuses to deliver happy endings and rather dwells in the tragedy, misery, and meaningless of life. While the woman may be sheltered compared to the man (which is why she asks him to stop telling sad stories), both of them lead lives characterized by oppression, disappointment, and tragedy. Sad stories are thus what they are familiar with, which makes such stories easy for the man to tell and easy for the woman to believe.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

“She wasn’t married, she was married off, said Reenie, rolling out the gingersnaps. The family arranged it. That’s what was done in such families, and who’s to say it was any worse or better than choosing for yourself? In any case, Adelia Montfort did her duty, and lucky to have the chance, as she was getting long in the tooth—she must have been twenty-three, which was counted as over the hill in those days.

**Related Characters:** Reenie (speaker), Benjamin Chase, Myra Sturgess, Adelia Montfort Chase, Iris Chase Griffen

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

Myra has driven the elderly Iris passed Avilion, the house in which Iris grew up that has since been converted into a nursing home called Valhalla. Iris has been recalling the house in its prime alongside the life of the woman who designed it: Iris’s grandmother Adelia. Adelia was born into an esteemed English-French Montreal family that experienced declining financial fortune, which led Adelia to marry Iris’ grandfather, the manufacturer Benjamin Chase. In this quotation, Iris recalls her family’s housekeeper, Reenie, explaining how Adelia’s marriage wasn’t her own decision, but was rather something arranged by her family. Reenie also comments on the harsh social expectations placed on women at the time, which meant that a woman not married by 23 was considered almost too old to be desirable.

Reenie’s reflections convey the novel’s ambivalent position on love and marriage. There are no happy marriages prominently featured in the novel, and almost all of the romantic love depicted in the story is thwarted or doomed in some way. If love is doomed to fail, then, it is not necessarily the case that a love-based marriage would ultimately be more happy or successful than a practical, economic-based one. This quotation is also a good example of the way in which the lack of quotation marks used in the novel can make it unclear whose thoughts are being conveyed, thereby blurring the boundary between the perspective of the narrator (Iris) and the other characters. While the passage begins with a statement clearly made by Reenie, the rest of the passage could be either Reenie’s words or Iris’ thoughts—there is no way to tell for sure. In this way, the novel presents truth (and particularly memory)

as something fluid and subjective rather than something based on irrefutable facts.

☞ When I was the age for it—thirteen, fourteen—I used to romanticize Adelia. I would gaze out of my window at night, over the lawns and the moon-silvered beds of ornamentals, and see her trailing wistfully through the grounds in a white lace tea gown. I gave her a languorous, world-weary, faintly mocking smile. Soon I added a lover. She would meet this lover outside the conservatory, which by that time was neglected—my father had no interest in steam-heated orange trees—but I restored it in my mind, and it supplied it with hothouse flowers [...]

In reality the chances of Adelia having had a lover were nil. The town was too small, its morals too provincial, she had too far to fall. She wasn't a fool. Also she had no money of her own.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Benjamin Chase, Adelia Montfort Chase

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 59-60

### Explanation and Analysis

Iris has told the story of her grandmother, Adelia, a refined woman from an established Montreal family who was “married off” to Iris’s grandfather, Benjamin. Adelia died before Iris was born, and in this passage the now-elderly Iris recalls a time during her early teenage years when she would “romanticize” Adelia, dreaming up a scenario wherein her grandmother had a secret lover. This is one of the most important passages in the novel due to the way it synthesizes the exploration of love, rebellion, independence, freedom, and narrative imagination. No doubt feeling burdened by the expectations placed on her (which were similar to those placed on her grandmother), Iris escapes into fantasy, dreaming up a version of Adelia who was rebellious, free, and romantically fulfilled.

Importantly, though, Iris also points out that such a fantasy was highly unrealistic. She cites all the reasons why the conditions in which Adelia was living would have made it practically impossible for her to have a lover. Significantly, however, Iris focuses on the external factors restraining Adelia from having a lover rather than on Adelia’s own feelings. Although the reader has limited access to Adelia’s

point of view (given that Iris, the narrator of the novel, never even met her), all the evidence about her suggests that she wouldn’t have necessarily wanted a lover. She seemed to have embraced her role as a society wife and likely would not have wanted to spoil her reputation. Iris’s fantasy is thus rooted in projection—it has no credible basis in reality. Indeed, there is irony in Iris’s conclusion that “the chances of Adelia having had a lover were nil,” considering that Iris herself—who is subject to the same rigid expectations and provincial attitudes as Adelia—*does* go on to have a secret lover when she grows up.

☞ And so Laura and I were brought up by her. We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren’t. As she was dead by then, we couldn’t argue.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Benjamin Chase, Adelia Montfort Chase, Laura Chase

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 62

### Explanation and Analysis

Iris has been telling the story of her grandmother Adelia, an elegant woman from an esteemed Montreal family who died before Iris was born. Part of the role Adelia was expected to play in her marriage to Iris’s grandfather Benjamin was adding respectability and “taste” to his life, and one of the main ways she did this was by designing Avilion, their house in Port Ticonderoga. In this passage, Iris shares how growing up inside that house felt like being raised by Adelia, even though Adelia herself wasn’t physically present. Because Adelia designed the house and imbued it so strongly with her particular tastes, there is an extent to which the house emulates her, representing her spirit and legacy even after she is dead.

While under other circumstances this could be a moving and consoling reminder of Adelia’s presence, Iris and Laura find it rather oppressive. This is because Adelia had such strict expectations of everyone in her family, including herself. Although Iris never knew Adelia personally, she grew up knowing what kind of woman Adelia would have wanted her to be (refined, elegant, genteel). Furthermore, Iris was also aware of how much she and Laura failed to live up to this ideal without even being able to properly fight it,

due to the fact that Adelia was already dead and thus could not be opposed. This last point—about the special, irrefragable power of the dead—is an important motif in the novel.

☛ And then, after the wedding, there was the war. Love, then marriage, then catastrophe. In Reenie's version, it seemed inevitable.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Alex Thomas, Reenie, Captain Norval Chase, Liliana Chase

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 70

### Explanation and Analysis

Iris has told the story of her parents' engagement and wedding via Reenie's account of what happened. Both Liliana and Norval were serious people and—although they came from slightly different class positions—they were thus well-matched, with the same attitude toward life. While telling Iris about the wedding, Reenie rapturously focused on all the different textiles involved rather than on the actual people. In this passage, Iris notes that Liliana and Norval's marriage happened just before World War I and that—at least in Reenie's opinion—the collapse of their union into disaster was “inevitable.”

It is not totally clear whether Iris believes that Liliana and Norval's relationship was doomed by the war or by the generally fragile and explosive nature of love and marriage. In either case, this quotation reflects the novel's message that love tends not to last. Of the many doomed romantic relationships in the novel, several (including that between Liliana and Norval as well as that between Iris and Alex) are thwarted or destroyed by the war. Yet this is not the only factor ruining love—others include class hierarchies and the restrictions placed on women's autonomy. Under such conditions, it is hardly surprising that the slide from love to disaster is “inevitable.”

☛ What would that be like—to long, to yearn for one who is right there before your eyes, day in and day out? I'll never know.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Richard Griffen, Alex Thomas, Captain Norval Chase, Liliana Chase

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 78

### Explanation and Analysis

Iris has explained how her father, Norval, was injured and traumatized in World War I, which killed both his brothers. When Norval returned, he had lost his faith in God and he took to drinking in order to numb the psychological trauma he incurred as a soldier. This estranged him from his devoutly religious wife, Iris's mother Liliana. In this passage, Iris wonders what it was like for Liliana and Norval—who she maintains still loved each other—to become so alienated from each other following the war.

Iris's comment that she will never personally understand this experience is intriguing. Iris experiences a lot of yearning in her life, although it is directed at someone—Alex Thomas—who isn't usually right in front of her, which is likely why she makes this statement. The person Iris *does* spend most of her time in close proximity to—her husband, Richard—is certainly never the object of her affection. At the same time, Iris's meditations on Alex make it seem as if he is present even when he isn't. She is constantly thinking of him, particularly after he goes to Europe to fight in the Spanish Civil War. There is an extent to which Iris's yearning makes Alex present for her even when he isn't, which adds an ironic layer to the statement she makes here.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ Like many peoples, ancient and modern, the Zycronians are afraid of virgins, dead ones especially. Women betrayed in love who have died unmarried are driven to seek in death what they've so unfortunately missed out on in life.

**Related Characters:** Man (speaker), Woman

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 115

### Explanation and Analysis

In the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, the man is continues to narrate his science-fiction story to the woman during their secret meetings. He tells the woman about a girl who is about to be sacrificed inside the Temple in Sakiel-Norn. Before the girl is killed, she will be raped by “the Lord

of the Underworld” who is really just a courtesan who dresses up. In this passage, the man explains the reasoning behind this ritual, noting that “Zycronians are afraid of virgins” because they believe that dead virgins will seek revenge on the living. Of course, there are multiple ways in which this belief isn’t exactly logically coherent, and these issues are crucial to the novel’s exploration of doomed love, female desire, violence, and death.

One of the things that is illogical (or at least logically contradictory) about the fear of dead virgins is the way in which it clashes with the depiction of living virgins. Part of the reason why in many cultures (including on Zycron) women’s virginity is treated as a big deal is because virginity is associated with traits such as passivity, purity, and submission. Within patriarchal culture, these traits are considered to constitute the ideal of feminine behavior. In a sense, virginity can be seen as a way of celebrating or fetishizing female powerlessness. However, as the man points out here, the flip side of this is a fear of female virgins and particularly those who *die* virgins. Women who want to seek revenge for being “betrayed in love” are imbued with a scary, destructive power and an appetite for violence.

●● I feel sorry for him. I think he’s only doing the best he can. I think we need another drink. How about it?  
I bet you’re going to kill him off. You have that glint.  
In all justice he’d deserve it. I think he’s a bastard, myself. But kings have to be, don’t they? Survival of the fittest and so forth. Weak to the wall.  
You don’t really believe that.

**Related Characters:** Man, Woman (speaker), King of Sakiel-Norn

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 130-131

### Explanation and Analysis

In the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, the man is still telling the woman his science-fiction story, explaining how a rival tribe who call themselves the People of Joy are planning to attack Sakiel-Norn and kill the King. The King, who is planning to sell a lover he’s grown bored with into slavery, is unaware of this plot. He even sees the campfire of the People of Joy in the distance but he doesn’t realize what

it is. At this point, the woman interrupts with the first line quoted here, saying that she feels sorry for the King. This indicates that she is capable of feeling sympathy for people in power (and even those who immorally abuse their power), a quality that distinguishes her from the man.

The man, on the other hand, indicates he believes that the King deserves to die. However, he hides the full nature of his opinion by then discussing “Survival of the fittest,” a concept he is actually parodying even while pretending to be sympathetic to it. The man’s communist beliefs means he believes that “survival of the fittest” is an unjust and immoral way of looking at the world adopted by elites to justify their own disproportionate power. He may believe that kings really have to be “bastard[s],” but unlike the woman who uses this idea to feel sympathy for the King, his conclusion (although it is unstated here) is that kings should therefore not exist.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

●● Although I was beginning to like him better, I’m ashamed to admit that I was more than a little skeptical about this story. There was too much melodrama in it—too much luck, both bad and good. I was still too young to be a believer in coincidence. And if he’d been trying to make an impression on Laura—was he trying?—he couldn’t have chosen a better way.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Callista (Callie) Fitzsimmons, Winifred Griffen Prior, Richard Griffen, Captain Norval Chase, Alex Thomas

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 190

### Explanation and Analysis

After the annual Labour Day picnic, Norval’s rival Richard Griffen and Richard’s sister Winifred come for dinner at Avilion. Norval’s girlfriend, Callie, is there, too, as is the young communist writer Alex Thomas, whom Laura meets at the picnic and invites to dinner. Alex is an orphan, and during dinner he explains that he was found in a burned-down house in a small Western European country during World War I, leading him to believe that his parents were killed by a bomb. In this passage, Iris reflects that although she likes Alex, she doesn’t quite believe his story about his origins. This is an important metafictional moment in the novel, meaning a moment in which the narrative draws

attention to its own fictional, constructed nature.

Iris's skepticism that Alex's story is true can be read as a kind of nod to the reader on multiple levels. If Alex is indeed a writer as the guests at the dinner have speculated, then his business is constructing stories, and it is possible that the one he tells about himself is exaggerated or falsified for dramatic effect. Iris herself is, after all, writing a book in her old age, and this very passage is constructed in that book. Her words here thus indicate that she might be self-conscious about her own narrative and its believability, especially as someone isolated from her community and estranged from her one living relative. There is also a level on which this quotation can be seen as a reference to Atwood's novel (which, of course, contains these other narratives), a self-conscious reflection on the extent to which readers are likely to accept "melodramatic" and highly coincidental stories as believable.

●● Not only were they outside agitators, they were foreign outside agitators, which was somehow more frightening. Small dark men with moustaches, who'd signed their names in blood and sworn to be loyal unto death, and who would start riots and stop at nothing, and set bombs and creep in at night and slit our throats while we slept (according to Reenie). These were their methods, these ruthless Bolsheviks and union organizers, who were all the same at heart (according to Elwood Murray). They wanted Free Love, and the destruction of the family, and the deaths by firing squad of anyone who had money—any money at all—or a watch, or a wedding ring. This was what had been done in Russia. So it was said.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Captain Norval Chase, Laura Chase, Alex Thomas, Elwood Murray, Reenie

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 203

### Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of the Great Depression, union organizers and political radicals have appeared in Port Ticonderoga—including Alex Thomas, the young atheist, orphan, and "Bolshevik" who strikes up a friendship with Laura. Meanwhile, there are rumors that "outside agitators" are encouraging the workers at Iris and Laura's father, Norval's, button factory to unionize. In this passage, Iris repeats Reenie and Elwood's negative views of the "agitators," which are clearly driven more by rumor, prejudice, and fear than an actual understanding of who

these men are and what they want.

As the latter half of the quotation shows, much of the paranoia about the agitators emerges from knowledge (and exaggeration) of what happened during the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which began in 1917. While it is true that these revolutionaries did kill a significant number of aristocrats, business owners, and other members of the elite, it's untrue that they shot anyone with "a watch, or a wedding ring." These exaggerations illustrate how people like Elwood get carried away by their fears and turn historical knowledge into mythical fabrication. It is also significant that Reenie, who is a member of the working class, aligns herself with her employers (the wealthy Chase family) rather than the agitators. There is a clash between her image of herself and the social position she occupies in reality.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

●● You might say he grabbed what he could get. Why wouldn't he? He had no scruples, his life was dog eat dog and it always had been. Or you could say they were both young so they didn't know any better. The young habitually mistake lust for love, they're infested with idealism of all kinds. And I haven't said he didn't kill her afterwards. As I've pointed out, he was nothing if not self-interested.

**Related Characters:** Man (speaker), Girl, Blind Assassin, Woman

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 257

### Explanation and Analysis

In the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, the man continues telling the woman the story of the planet Zycron—and, in particular, about the blind assassin sent to kill a girl who was about to be sacrificed anyway. In a surprise twist, the blind assassin falls in love with the girl. At this point in the story, the woman interrupts to express her surprise at the romantic turn of events in the story. In this quotation, the man denies this accusation, returning to his usual cynicism in a rather defensive manner.

This quotation is a key example of the man's mixed feelings regarding romantic love. Although he is ostensibly discussing the science-fiction story, it's obvious that the internal conflict on which he is truly focused relates to his

feelings about the woman. The man obviously prides himself on his rational, cynical, and harsh outlook on the world. This is evident when he is quick to characterize the blind assassin as selfish and to say that the blind assassin might still kill the girl with whom he fell in love. The man's comment that "the young habitually mistake lust for love" is evidently an expression of his own anxieties about his relationship with the woman. Are they really in love, or just caught up in feelings of lust? The man seems highly resistant to the prospect of letting himself confuse one for the other.

The passage also serves as an important reminder on the way loving and violent feelings can coexist, a phenomenon which, the novel seems to suggest, is particularly common in men. Just because the blind assassin loves the woman doesn't mean he won't kill her—a reminder that, in the mind of the man telling the story, love does not preclude violence.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☛☛ The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date. Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging as a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it.

Impossible, of course.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 283

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote, from the very beginning of Chapter Seven, is one of Iris's many interludes when she speaks in the present about the process of writing. During these interludes, Iris has reflected on her decision to write the narrative of her life, although she never gives an explicitly clear reason as to why she is so intent on recording "the truth." This quotation further conveys both the mystery and the importance of Iris's writing process. Indeed, her decision to record the truth of her life becomes a kind of paradox: if no one is going to read the narrative, then what is the point of writing down the truth?

Of course, just because pretending that no one will read the narrative is an important strategy to accessing the truth doesn't mean that no one will actually read the narrative

(although Iris has previously mentioned that she doesn't know who she is writing for and that it may be no one). On one level, this quotation suggests that Iris is writing for no one but herself, recalling the narrative of her life as a way to set her own record straight and perhaps to achieve peace from the sense of guilt that's been tormenting her for years. At the same time, one could argue that her apparent desire for no one to read what she's writing could be somewhat disingenuous.

☛☛ She takes after Laura in that respect: the same tendency towards absolutism, the same refusal to compromise, the same scorn for the grosser human failings. To get away with that, you have to be beautiful. Otherwise it seems mere peevishness.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Laura Chase, Aimee Adelia Griffen, Sabrina Griffen

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 288

### Explanation and Analysis

The elderly Iris has taken steps toward writing a will and has been reflecting on what will happen to a trunk containing notebooks, the manuscript of *The Blind Assassin*, the first edition of the novel, and letters from readers and scholars about the book. She considers leaving it to her granddaughter, Sabrina, even though she hasn't heard from Sabrina in years. Iris believes that Sabrina is trying to feed the hungry in India, and in this passage she reflects on the similarities between Sabrina and Laura. On one reading, the similarities between Sabrina and her great-aunt (whom she never met) are moving and even provide a source of hope. While Laura's life was characterized by repression and tragedy (and ended with her suicide), Sabrina has more freedom and can thus live out some of Laura's dreams on her behalf.

At the same time, there is also a strong note of spite in this passage. Iris's comment that a person has to be beautiful in order to get away with the rigid and sanctimonious qualities that Sabrina and Laura share seems to hint at feelings of envy and resentment. Importantly, Iris does not convey this resentment outright but lets it simmer as subtext. It is up to the reader to notice where her assessment of other characters is colored by her own negative (and sometimes even petty) feelings.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☛☛ But it's too good to be true, said Will. It must be a trap. It may even be some devilish mind-device of the Xenorians, to keep us from being in the war. It's Paradise, but we can't get out of it. And anything you can't get out of is Hell.

But this isn't Hell. It's happiness, said one of the Peach Women who was materializing from the branch of a nearby tree. There's nowhere to go from here. Relax. Enjoy yourselves. You'll get used to it.

And that's the end of the story.

That's it? She says. You're going to keep those two men cooped up in there forever?

I did what you wanted. You wanted happiness.

**Related Characters:** Woman, Man, Will (speaker), Boyd

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 355-356

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, the woman has complained that the science-fiction story the man has told her is too brutal, miserable, and depressing. In response, the man tells her another story, this time about two human men named Will and Boyd who—in the midst of fighting the evil Lizard Men of the planet Xenor—find themselves on a mysterious planet called Aa'A populated by Peach Women. All their desires and needs on the planet are instantly fulfilled—whether for food, sex, or shelter. Yet in this passage, Will comes to feel that the paradise of Aa'A is actually Hell, because it's a “trap” where nothing really changes and no one is allowed to leave.

In this sense, Will is articulating an old philosophical conundrum: is there such thing as total happiness, or does happiness rely on a contrast with sadness in order exist? Moreover, if happiness cannot exist without sadness, then how could heaven be real? In the context of the novel, the man's rejection of happiness (which he portrays through his stories) seems to come out of a place of bitterness and disillusionment. Forced to live in hiding due to his political beliefs and only able to see the woman he loves in secret, stolen slices of time due to her marriage, it is little wonder that he is critical of happiness as a concept. At the same time, the cynicism with which he discusses romantic love suggests that he actually believe that a whole life trapped in any one situation (including a romantic union) is actually a “trap,” even if a person is trapped with someone they love.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☛☛ I look back over what I've written and I know it's wrong, not because of what I've set down, but because of what I've omitted. What isn't there has a presence, like the absence of light.

You want the truth, of course. You want me to put two and two together. But two and two doesn't necessarily get you the truth.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Mr. Erskine, Laura Chase, Winifred Griffen Prior, Richard Griffen

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 395

**Explanation and Analysis**

Iris has recounted a summer trip she took with Richard, Winifred, and Laura to England, New York, Toronto, and then Avilion. At Avilion, Iris and Laura saw Reenie for the first time since they left Port Ticonderoga. Toward the end of the trip, Laura brought up Mr. Erskine, the tutor who molested her when she was a child, and how Iris didn't believe Laura when she told her that it was happening. This quotation is the opening passage of the next section of the novel. It is narrated by the present-day Iris, reflecting on the construction of the narrative she is writing about her past.

Iris's use of the second-person tense to address an imagined reader allows her to represent the internal conflict she feels about representing the truth. Hints have already surfaced that Iris might be an unreliable narrator. For example, the fact that she didn't notice or believe that Mr. Erskine was abusing Laura shows that there are gaps and misunderstandings in her knowledge. At the same time, this passage suggests that the unreliable nature of Iris's narrative is as much (if not more) the result of her deliberate withholding information than misunderstanding it. Here, she admits that she has purposefully “omitted” parts of the narrative even though she knows that the reader wants to know the whole truth. This conveys Iris's own internal conflict—there seems to be one part of her that wants to expose the truth in its entirety, whereas another cannot find the courage to do so.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☞☞ The sudden invasion changes things for the Zycronians. Barbarians and urbanites, incumbents and rebels, masters and slaves—all forget their differences and make common cause. Class barriers dissolve—the Snilfards discard their ancient titles along with their face masks, and roll up their sleeves, manning the barricades alongside the Ygniroids.

**Related Characters:** Woman, Man

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 400

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*, the last story that the man tells the woman is about the Lizard Men of Xenor, a brutally violent race. After the man leaves Canada to fight in the Spanish Civil War, the woman scours stores to find the version of the story printed in a science-fiction magazine. In the story, the invasion of the Lizard Men has the unintended consequence of uniting the heavily hierarchical city of Sakiel-Norn against a common enemy, as described in this quotation. This is an unexpected and rather over-simplistic turn of events that seems to indicate the man chose to excise his political worldview from the story (perhaps in order to make it easier to sell).

On one hand, it is sometimes true that in times of crisis, different classes and races end up being forced to work together and previous divisions become less prominent. At the same time, given what the man has narrated about the Ygniroids' desire to resist their subjugation, it seems unlikely that they would be so willing to forget all the ways in which the Snilfards brutally oppressed them and fight alongside them. Indeed, it seems more likely that the Ygniroids would team up with the Lizard Men in hope of destroying the Snilfards. The fact that the man composes the story in this way in order to get it published indicates that he was so desperate for money that he was forced to compromise his political and artistic integrity.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☞☞ Laura herself didn't know it, of course. She had no thought of playing the romantic heroine. She became that only later, in the frame of her own outcome and thus in the minds of her admirers. In the course of daily life she was frequently irritating, like anyone. Or dull. Or joyful, she could be that as well: given the right conditions, the secret of which was known only to her, she could drift off into a kind of rapture.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Woman, Man, Laura Chase

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 417

**Explanation and Analysis**

Chapter Ten ended with a separation between the man and woman in the novel-within-the-novel, *The Blind Assassin*. The woman has had a baby with her husband, while the man has left to fight in the Spanish Civil War. At the very end of the chapter, the woman dreams of him, but in the end he disappears. In the beginning of Chapter Eleven, Iris writes that at this point in the narrative of her and Laura's life (which, for the most part, lines up temporally with the novel-within-the-novel by this point), "things take a darker turn." In this passage, she talks about how Laura didn't anticipate this "darker turn" because the framework of tragedy through which people now read her wasn't apparent at the time.

This is an important reflection on the difference between narrative and ordinary life. People living their real lives do not usually think of themselves as "romantic heroine[s]," not only because they can't predict their own fate but also because real life is more complicated than a story. In the latter part of the passage, Iris discusses this, showing how Laura was not just a tragic, sympathetic victim. Instead, she was three-dimensional—as much annoying, boring, and happy as tragically sad. It seems as if Iris is saying this in order to correct her own presentation of Laura and ensure that the reader doesn't get so swept up in the "romantic" narrative that they lose sight of the truth behind it.

Following the death of Norval, Laura has (reluctantly) been living with Richard, Winifred, and Iris in Toronto, where she has caused a great deal of trouble. Recently, Winifred has complained to Iris that Laura has been expressing outlandish ideas, such as saying that love is more important than marriage. When Iris confronts Laura about this in private, Laura replies with this quotation. From a contemporary perspective, it may seem obvious that Laura's argument is at least partly correct. These days, many would argue that love is self-evidently more important than marriage. Furthermore, Laura's argument about marriage being an "outworn institution" that is more an economic transaction than a sacred bond foreshadows the feminist claims that became popular later in the 20th century.

Significantly, Laura frames her critique of marriage not in a progressive feminist light, but rather in a Christian one. Following Jesus's tradition of focusing on the principles behind rules rather than the rules themselves, Laura argues that love is what's important, not marriage. One could argue that Laura's need to draw on Christianity in order to justify this claim is evidence of the restrictions placed on women and their thought during this era. At the same time, it also obvious that Laura's faith intensely informs the way she approaches the world—it isn't just a cover for subversive views.

**Related Characters:** Laura Chase (speaker), Iris Chase Griffen, Winifred Griffen Prior, Richard Griffen, Captain Norval Chase

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 424

#### Explanation and Analysis

I only said marriage was an outworn institution. I said it had nothing to do with love, that's all. Love is giving, marriage is buying and selling. You can't put love into a contract. Then I said there was no marriage in Heaven.

### Chapter 13 Quotes

I was relieved: all might yet be well. Laura was still in town. She would talk to me later.

She has, too, though she tends to repeat herself, as the dead have a habit of doing. They say all the things they said to you in life; but they rarely say anything new.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Alex Thomas, Winifred Griffen Prior, Richard Griffen, Laura Chase

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 491

#### Explanation and Analysis

Iris has explained how Laura revealed to her that she wasn't insane when Richard and Winifred had her institutionalized at BellaVista—Laura's claims that she was pregnant were true, and she confesses that they forced her to get an abortion there. Laura also explained that she allowed herself to be raped (by Richard, although she doesn't explicitly specify this) in order to save Alex's life, only for Iris to inform her that Alex was killed in the war and that Iris had been having an affair with him. This devastates Laura, who has been in love with Alex since childhood, and so she runs away with Iris's purse and steals Iris's car. The next day, while Iris is at lunch, Laura comes by the house and, in this quotation, Iris expresses her relief, believing they will talk soon. However, as the quotation also indicates, the sisters never speak again because after this, Laura dies.

At the same time, the quotation also suggests that death doesn't actually end the conversations that occur between people—rather, it transforms them. As has been made clear throughout the book, Laura's voice remains present in Iris's mind long after her death. While Laura might not be literally communicating with her sister, Iris is haunted by all the things Laura said to her during her life, as well as the things that she imagined Laura would say if she were still alive in the present. Indeed, this is why Iris feels so hounded by guilt: she hears Laura saying the same things over and over again, thereby never allowing Iris to move on from the wrongs she committed. This suggests that death is traumatic not because it is a permanent separation, but rather because it prevents the further growth of a relationship, instead keeping it stuck in an endlessly repeating pattern.

### Chapter 14 Quotes

How can I describe the pool of grief into which I was now falling? I can't describe it, and so I won't try.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Laura Chase

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 500

#### Explanation and Analysis

Iris has described the moment she learned that Laura drove

Iris's car off the Jubilee Bridge and died. Afterward, Iris found a pile of Laura's notebooks hidden inside Iris's stocking drawer. Each of the notebooks was labelled with a different school subject, and in the Latin notebook, Laura had ripped out her homework apart from one Virgil translation Iris helped her with. In this brief and seemingly simple quotation, Iris gestures at the intensity of her grief without actually describing it. On the surface, her statement seems ordinary and innocuous—many people would agree that grief is difficult or impossible to describe, which makes it pointless to try to do so.

Yet considering the novel's attention to the act of constructing narrative and the relationship between narrative, omission, and truth, Iris's statement contains further layers of meaning. Previously, Iris has stated that the omissions in her narrative have a kind of presence, which draw attention to the fact that it is unreliable. What does it mean for Iris to deliberately omit her grief, considering her charged relationship with Laura and the ways in which Iris is bound up in her death? It is possible that Iris is refraining from describing the full extent of her grief not just because it was so intense as to be unrepresentable, but because there are parts of it that she does not want to be represented—perhaps because she feels somewhat responsible for what happened to Laura.

☛ What did I want? Nothing much. Just a memorial of some kind. But what is a memorial, when you come right down to it, but a commemoration of wounds endured? Endured, and resented. Without memory, there can be no revenge.

*Lest we forget. Remember me. To you from failing hands we throw.*  
Cries of the thirsty ghosts.

Nothing is more difficult than to understand the dead, I've found; but nothing is more dangerous than to ignore them.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Richard Griffen, Laura Chase

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 508

### Explanation and Analysis

Iris has described her separation from Richard after Laura's suicide and after Iris realized that Richard had been raping Laura during their marriage. She moves to Port Ticonderoga and lives a largely quiet, peaceful life. However, her conscience begins to trouble her, and in this passage she

admits that she wanted to memorialize Laura somehow. At the same time, Iris feels suspicious and wary of this urge, knowing that memorialization can be a charged and dangerous task. Indeed, Iris's motivations for memorializing Laura seem to emerge from two contradictory directions. On one hand, she wants Laura to receive some of the justice in death that she never had in life, which includes the justice of not being ignored.

Yet on the other hand, Iris also seems to want to absolve herself of guilt. This is certainly a dangerous impulse, particularly given how it clashes with the need to give justice to Laura. Indeed, the conflicting needs of the two sisters—which caused such trouble when they were both alive—continues to be a problem after Laura's death.

☛ As for the book, Laura didn't write a word of it. But you must have known for some time. I wrote it myself, during my long evenings alone, when I was waiting for Alex to come back, and then afterwards, once I knew he wouldn't. I didn't think of what I was doing as writing—just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Aimee Adelia Griffen, Winifred Griffen Prior, Richard Griffen, Alex Thomas, Laura Chase

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 512

### Explanation and Analysis

In the concluding pages of the novel, Iris describes how, after Richard's death, she made a living selling antiques and how she eventually lost custody of Aimee to a vindictive Winifred. Finally, she then explicitly admits what she has been hinting at throughout the book: although *The Blind Assassin* (the novel-within-the-novel) was published in Laura's name, Iris was the one who actually wrote it. Iris's statement that she didn't think of herself as "writing," just "writing down," is important. It shows how the devaluation of women's thoughts and artistic work led her to underestimate her own talent, yet perversely freed her to compose a narrative based on the (scandalous) truth of her own life.

The most important part of this quotation, however, is the final line. Throughout the novel, Atwood has explored the

way in which narratives do (or do not) represent the truth and she's contested the notion that there is such thing as a single, objective account of anything. Here, Iris asserts not only that her own memory (which, like that of all humans, is inevitably flawed) is the truth, but that her imagination is, too. This unexpected and counterintuitive definition of truth suggests that objective truth is an unattainable goal and that subjective narratives provide the best chance of accessing the truth. At the same time, Iris could be accused of trying to exonerate herself here by asserting that her own biased and self-interested perspective constitutes the truth.

☛ It was no great leap from that to naming Laura as the author. You might decide it was cowardice that inspired me, or a failure of nerve—I've never been fond of spotlights. Or simple prudence: my own name would have guaranteed the loss of Aimee, whom I lost in any case. But on second thought it was merely doing justice, because I can't say Laura didn't write a word. Technically that's accurate, but in another sense—what Laura would have called the spiritual sense—you could say she was my collaborator. The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Alex Thomas, Aimee Adelia Griffen, Laura Chase

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 512

### Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Iris explains her reasoning behind publishing *The Blind Assassin* (the novel-within-the-novel) under Laura's name. She notes that the reader may have assumed she did so out of some kind of cowardice or concern about how the novel would affect her reputation. Although she denies this, it is up to the reader how seriously they want to take this denial. It could well be rooted in Iris being an unreliable narrator, trying to absolve herself for what was in fact a cowardly act. To some readers, the fact that Iris chose to publish the book in Laura's name without her consent might be seen as unforgivable.

On the other hand, Iris's reflections about how Laura was, in some way, her "collaborator" is compelling. Due to their lifelong closeness and the fact that Laura was such a major influence on her sister, she did help "write" the story of Iris's

life. (Laura was, after all, the one to introduce Iris to Alex, arguably her most important act of influence.) Iris even slightly contradicts herself at the end of the passage by saying that neither she *nor* Laura is the real author of *The Blind Assassin*. This conveys the reality that stories (particularly those based on real life) have lives of their own. No one person is the single inventor of them, because stories ultimately have their own kind of power, which escapes writerly control.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☛☛ The photo has been cut; a third of it has been cut off. In the lower left corner there's a hand, scissored off at the wrist, resting on the grass. It's the hand of the other one, the one who is always in the picture whether seen or not. The hand that will set things down.

**Related Characters:** Iris Chase Griffen (speaker), Alex Thomas, Sabrina Griffen, Laura Chase, Man, Woman

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 517

### Explanation and Analysis

Iris has revealed that she is the real author of *The Blind Assassin* (the novel-within-the-novel) and that the main narrative of Atwood's novel is another manuscript Iris has written in order to complete and correct the story contained within the book she published under Laura's name. She has also dedicated and addressed this second book to Sabrina, to give her estranged granddaughter a chance to know the truth about her family history. In the epilogue to *The Blind Assassin*, the woman looks at the photograph of herself and the man, just as she did in the prologue. (Indeed, some of the sentences in the epilogue are repeated almost word-for-word in the epilogue.) However, the difference is that in the epilogue, the woman mentions the other hand that's in the picture—the hand whose body has been cut out of frame.

Considering the reader now knows that the woman is based on Iris, it is obvious that this hand belongs to Laura. Yet because both sisters cut the other one out of their own respective copies of their picture with Alex in the main narrative, there is a sense in which it could also be the other way around. This confirms the idea that Iris and Laura's identities are fluid or reversible. At the same time, this

quotation also emphasizes that the sisters are indivisible. Even if they try to cut each other out of each other's lives, they cannot ever be truly separate—and indeed, even after

Laura dies, she remains a haunting, active presence for Iris. Her hand, the hand that helped write the story of Iris's life, is always there.



## 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.

## CHAPTER 1

Ten days after the end of World War II, Iris Chase's sister Laura drives her car off a bridge. The policeman who tells Iris what happened says it must have been an accident involving the car brakes, although two witnesses both claimed they saw Laura deliberately turn the car. Iris doesn't think it was an accident and explains that Laura "had her reasons." However, she tells the policeman that she's sure it was an accident. Before her death, Laura hid a stack of exercise books inside Iris's stocking drawer to make sure Iris found them. When Iris comes across these, she thinks about her nursemaid and housekeeper, Reenie, who would always attend to Iris when she hurt herself as a child.

A *Toronto Star* newspaper article dated May 26, 1945 describes Laura's death as "accidental." It says that Laura was 25 and notes that her sister Iris is the wife of Richard Griffen, a "prominent manufacturer." The police believe that the accident was caused by one of the car tires catching an exposed streetcar track.

The prologue to **The Blind Assassin** written by Laura Chase and published in 1947, is entitled *Perennials for the Rock Garden*. The prologue describes an unnamed woman looking at the only photo she has of her unnamed lover. In the photo, the couple are eating a picnic underneath a tree. She is smiling at the man "in a way she can't remember smiling at anyone since." In the corner of the picture there is someone else's hand, the only part of their body that is visible in the photo.

## CHAPTER 2

In **The Blind Assassin**, the man asks the woman what kind of story she wants him to tell her, noting that he is best at science fiction. They are at the same picnic from when the photograph was taken. The man begins telling the story, set on the planet Zycron, which is "located in another dimension of space." The planet features a purple ocean, mountains, "undead" women in tombs, a desert, canals, and the ruins of ancient civilizations. The man interrupts himself to ask if there are any cheese sandwiches left. The woman thinks that she has never been this happy before, and the man chimes in that everything about the situation is perfect.

*The beginning of the novel introduces the idea of conflicting narratives and the relationship of narratives to truth. The police officer chooses to tell one story about Laura's death which characterizes it as an accident, and Iris agrees with this story even though she doesn't think it's true. In this sense, she and the police officer choose to participate in a fictional version of reality that is more respectable or palatable than the truth.*



*The fact that Iris's husband, Richard, is a "prominent manufacturer" indicates the kinds of social expectations and pressures to which she (and the rest of her family) are subjected. It's likely that Iris and her family are expected to uphold a certain level of public decorum since they're of a high social class.*



*The opening of the novel has elements of crime fiction and mystery as well as romance. Laura's death is enigmatic, as is the love story in the novel published under her name in 1947, leading the reader to question if there is a relation between them or if her novel will hold some kind of clue to her death.*



*In contrast to the sinister mystery introduced in the opening of the novel, this excerpt from The Blind Assassin depicts a decidedly happy, idyllic scene. The man and woman are evidently deeply in love and their romantic happiness is conveyed through storytelling.*



There is a pile of rocks on Zycron that five separate tribes claim as their own, each of which tells a different version of the same story about the rocks. According to each story, the rocks are ruins of a city that was violently destroyed, all its inhabitants massacred. Each tribe claims that they were the ones to destroy the city. There is also an alternative myth, which posits that the city wasn't destroyed at all but instead shrunk and that it still exists at a smaller size today. The woman stops the man, telling him that she is cold and that she has to go home before people start wondering where she is. The man begs her not to go, but she says that she has to.

Another newspaper article, this one from the *Globe and Mail* and dated June 4, 1947, describes the death of 47-year-old Richard E. Griffen. Griffen mysteriously disappeared for several days before his body was found in his sailboat near his house, which is named **Avilion**, in Port Ticonderoga. At the time of his death, Griffen was running as the Progressive Conservative candidate to represent the Toronto district of St. David's. He was a textile, garment, and light manufacturer who played a crucial role supplying the army with uniforms and weapons. The Canadian Prime Minister gave a statement expressing his sorrow over Griffen's death and calling him "one of this country's most able men." Griffen's late sister-in-law Laura Chase's first novel was posthumously published in May; he is survived by his sister Winifred, wife Iris, and 10-year-old daughter Aimee.

Back in **The Blind Assassin**, the woman asks why there are humans on Zycron considering it's in a whole other dimension of space. The man explains that 8,000 years ago, the Earth was colonized by Zycronites who developed a thriving civilization but who eventually "blew themselves up through being too clever." Modern-day humans are descended from the "stragglers" who were left. The city that was destroyed and turned into a pile of rubble was called **Sakiel-Norn**, which means "The Pearl of Destiny." It was known to be a supremely beautiful place. The elite class who lived there, the Snilfards, were "skilled metalworkers and inventors of ingenious mechanical devices."

*The woman's interruption is important—it not only severs the story that the man is telling, bursting the illusion of the fictional world he is creating—it also serves as a reminder that there is something troubled (even doomed) about their love story. The woman is obviously not allowed to be at the picnic with him, although the reader does not yet know why this is. It seems that reality has encroached back into their fictional idyll.*



*Due to the fact that Laura and Richard's deaths appear in such close succession and are both announced via newspaper articles, the deaths are situated as parallels of each other. Moreover, both deaths appear to be accidents, but—given what Iris said about Laura's death being a suicide—it is reasonable to assume that Richard's could be a suicide, too. This creates a highly ominous atmosphere, a sense that something deeply disturbing is afoot in the Chase-Griffen family that has caused these two tragic, mysterious deaths.*



*According to the man's story, modern-day humans are descended from ancient Zycronites, and this detail is very important. This means that Zycronites are not distant aliens who have qualities, practices, and norms that are totally different from human culture—instead, they represent the very essence of what human culture is, because (at least according to the story) they are what humanity is descended from.*



Both male and female Snilfards wore fabric over their faces; covering one's face without being a Snilfard was punishable by death. The Snilfards indulged in high culture and parties and conducted extramarital affairs. The lower class, which consisted of "smallholders, serfs, and slaves," were the Ygniroids. The enslaved Ygniroids had no protection from being raped or murdered and were prohibited from learning how to read or write. Snilfards could become Ygniroids if they went bankrupt, whereas it was much harder for Ygniroids to become Snilards, even if they managed to grow wealthy. The woman points out that the man's "Bolshevism" is influencing the story he is telling, but the man replies that **Sakiel-Norn** is actually based on ancient Mesopotamian culture.

The man and woman are having their picnic on a hot and humid August day. The man asks the woman where she is "supposed to be," and she replies that she is pretending to be shopping. The man asks when he can see her. The woman looks nervous and the man assures her that no one she knows is in the park. He suggests that she get a dog, so that she can have the excuse of taking it for walks.

A *Toronto Star* article from August 25, 1975, describes the death of Aimee Griffen, the 38-year-old niece of the well-known novelist Laura Chase. Aimee is survived by her 4-year-old daughter Sabrina, whom she is believed to have neglected as a result of drug and alcohol addiction. Sabrina is now being cared for by her great-aunt Winifred.

In **The Blind Assassin**, the man calls the woman at home from a public phone, begging her to sneak out of the house to meet him. They meet at the park, hidden by the nighttime darkness. They smoke a cigarette together and the man continues with the story about Zycron, telling the woman that there are enslaved children in **Sakiel-Norn**. A major trading city, Sakiel-Norn was built by slave labor and is known for its luxury textiles, which are extraordinarily beautiful. In particular, the city produces carpets made by enslaved children, whose fingers are small enough to do the nimble work of weaving. This work eventually makes them blind, and carpet sellers brag about how many children are blinded making a given carpet.

*The woman's comment about the man's "Bolshevism" is another important detail. The Blind Assassin was published in 1947, meaning that the story of the man and the woman comes from the first half of the 20th century. The Bolshevik Revolution, a communist uprising that led to the establishment of the Soviet Union, began in 1917. The woman thus indicates that the man is a communist who's sympathetic to the Bolsheviks' demands for the eradication of social inequality, poverty, and oppression.*



*This passage confirms that the woman is not permitted to be seeing the man, but again, it is ambiguous exactly why this is the case. It could be that she is having some kind of extramarital affair with the man, or it could simply be that the social norms of her era prohibit her from dating or even spending time alone with men.*



*The pattern of deaths (and, more specifically, suicides) continues here. Again, the fact that Aimee's death is reported in a newspaper article rather than in the main narrative further associates it with the deaths of Laura and Richard.*



*The use of enslaved children to make textiles and the pride taken in blinding them in the process may seem exceptionally horrifying, but given the historical context of the novel and what the reader knows about the man's political beliefs, it becomes clear that he is basing his depiction of Sakiel-Norn on reality. One of the main forces driving the expansion of communist belief in the early 20th century was objections to labor exploitation, including of children and textile workers.*



After going blind, the children are sold into brothels, but some escape and become assassins. The woman interrupts the man and tells him the story is too sad. He replies that he tells the stories he's "good at" and also the ones she'll believe. When the woman continues to insist that it's not good to be so cruel, the man replies that he is simply reflecting the nature of the world, which is a cruel place. There is a sense of tension between the man and the woman; the man hasn't kissed the woman yet this evening. He asks her to stand at her bedroom window with the light on, claiming it's so he can know that she has gotten home safe, although this isn't the real reason. He says he will stand outside and wait to see the light, even though it's raining.

An obituary in a February 19, 1998 copy of *The Globe and Mail* lists the death of Winifred Griffen Prior, a "noted philanthropist" and the sister of Richard Griffen. She is survived by her great-niece Sabrina, who is "currently travelling in India."

In **The Blind Assassin**, the man and woman are in a car. They have "two or three hours" ahead to spend together. The man has borrowed the car from a friend and drives them to a spot under a bridge. The woman is nervous about being seen, but the man assures her that no one is around. Someone has drawn a heart in lipstick with the letter *L* and four letters in a square around it: F U C K. The man and the woman lie on the ground and have sex. Afterward, the man tells the woman not to "worship him," gesturing to the fact that one day, their affair will have to end. The woman asks that they talk about something else, and the man resumes the story of **Sakiel-Norn**.

In **Sakiel-Norn**, it is taboo to mention that the city's wealth is created by slave labor. A practice of human sacrifice has been around since the city's mythical founding, when its nine founding fathers are said to have sacrificed their own children to the gods. Of the nine gates surrounding the city, four are in pairs, with one for entering and one for exiting; the ninth gate is for the gods. It is at this gate that human sacrifices take place. Families do what they can to protect their children from being sacrificed. For instance, Snilfards "mutilate" their female children because sacrificing a girl with a deformity is seen as an insult to the gods.

*The fact that the woman believes the story is too sad suggests that she may be more sheltered than the man, perhaps due to coming from a different class background and from having restricted access to education and the public sphere due to her gender. Indeed, the differences between the woman and man seem to both enhance and complicate their romantic union, as shown by the tensions that become apparent in this passage.*



*Winifred is the only character listed in the novel so far who died as an old woman, rather than under mysterious and tragic circumstances while fairly young. This perhaps suggests that although Winifred is part of the same family circle as Laura, Richard, and Aimee, she did not fall into the same sort of circumstances that led to their deaths.*



*This passage oscillates between a romantic, idealized version of love and the more mundane, even vulgar aspect of relationships. There is an indication that the woman prefers the former view of romance, whereas the man has a more down-to-earth attitude, as evidenced when he tells her not to "worship him." This difference in opinion about romance likely contributes to the evident tension between the couple.*



*Again, Sakiel-Norn may seem unusually brutal and horrifying due to the fact that it has practices—including human sacrifice—that are likely unfamiliar to the reader. At the same time, it is important to remember that human sacrifice has been part of many different cultures over different historical periods. In the Bible, for example, God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son, and Abraham agrees to do so.*



Snilfards also adopt “foundlings” in order to sacrifice them instead of their biological children. Eventually, they stop bothering to raise these adopted girls in their own homes, instead giving them straight to temples to be raised in their names, like “owning a racehorse.” Over time, there is a decline in religious belief, although the ritual of human sacrifice continues for the sake of tradition. Some of the girls who are raised to be sacrificed end up rebelling once they discover their fate. As a result, it becomes common for these girls’ tongues to be cut out three months before they are due to be killed. The man compares these mute girls being led to the sacrificial altar to “pampered society bride[s].”

This comment infuriates the woman, who accuses the man of being titillated by his own story. The man apologizes for upsetting her and offers to rewrite the story, but the woman replies that it’s too late and gets up to leave. The man begs her to stay, and eventually the woman asks him what she is going to do when the man is no longer there. The man assures her that she will “get over it.”

In 1998, the alumni newsletter of Colonel Henry Parkman High School announces a new \$200 creative writing prize in memory of Laura Chase. The prize is named in honor of the “famed local authoress” Laura Chase, and Laura’s sister Iris will present the inaugural award.

## CHAPTER 3

Iris wakes up dreading the award ceremony. Reluctantly, she gets out of bed and into the shower. She finds it hard to recognize her own elderly self and she fears that she is going to die by accidentally falling down the stairs. She doesn’t eat breakfast, only drinking a glass of water. At 9:30 a.m., Walter picks her up. Iris can tell by the way Walter is dressed that he won’t be attending the ceremony, which makes sense considering that he doesn’t read. Iris thinks, “I should have married someone like Walter. Good with his hands.” However, she then revises this and thinks that she shouldn’t have married anyone at all. When they pull up to the school, Myra is waiting to greet them.

*This passage contains an important example of the man’s veiled critique of wealthy people and the way in which they can behave as if they are above the law. In theory, religion should be an equalizing force, yet the wealthy Snilfards find a way to exempt themselves from the practice of human sacrifice by essentially buying others to be sacrificed instead of their own children. This could be interpreted as a critique of social inequality under capitalism.*



*As can commonly happen between romantic couples, the woman’s objections to the man’s storytelling are really about something else—she seems concerned about how she will survive without him, although it is not yet clear where he is going.*



*The prize named after Laura might make it appear as if The Blind Assassin achieved prominence and acclaim, but the fact that it is hosted by her own high school suggests that her fame may only be local.*



*It is obvious that Iris is an isolated and rather sad old woman, full of uncertainty and regret. This is evidenced not only by her dread at attending the ceremony, her fear of dying by falling down the stairs, and her wistful thoughts about marrying someone like Walter, but—perhaps even more powerfully—by the way she changes her mind over whether it would have been better to marry. Rather than coming to a state of wisdom and acceptance about her life with age, Iris remains lost.*



Myra is overweight and grey-haired. She is constantly trying to bring Iris to the local hairdresser. She gives Iris a sickly brownie and cup of coffee, which Iris pretends to eat. The ceremony begins with a prayer. The graduates then arrive onstage to receive their diplomas, and Iris thinks about how all young people have a particular kind of beauty. At the same time, she feels resentful of young people for not realizing how lucky they are. Finally, the time comes for the Laura Chase prize to be awarded, an event that begins with a long, rapturous speech about Winifred, who is an “old bitch” in Iris’s opinion. The politician introducing the award then speaks about Laura, carefully dodging the subject of her death, which everyone believes was a suicide.

**The Blind Assassin** was similarly a source of scandal: people tended to read it in secret, hoping to find “smut” and to discover how the characters corresponded to real people. Everyone assumed the woman in the story was Laura, but there was much speculation over the identity of the man. Ultimately, the novel was dismissed “a thin book, so helpless.” Suddenly, the winner of the prize is announced, though Iris misses her name. The young woman is tall, with light yellow-brown skin, which leads Iris to speculate that she has Asian heritage. Iris wonders if her own granddaughter, Sabrina, “looks like that now.”

Feeling overwhelmed, Iris manages to say a few words as she presents the award. She speaks vaguely about how Laura would have felt about it, careful not to say anything that isn’t true. As she hands the award to the winner, she whispers, “Bless you. Be careful.” The winner kisses Iris on the cheek. Iris, stunned, is helped back into her seat.

Spring is coming, although Iris can no longer tend to her blossoming garden like she used to. In her old age, she is forced to confront the reality of her own mortality. Sitting with a notebook and pen, Iris remembers when, in 1929, Laura borrowed the first fountain pen Iris owned and she broke it. Now, Iris wonders why she is writing, but begins anyway. Her doctor tells her she needs to walk every day, but she doesn’t like doing it, as she feels like everyone stares at her. She wonders if it was a mistake to move back to Port Ticonderoga. Earlier, she walked through town and observed the changes to local businesses.

*Although the prize is supposed to honor Laura’s memory, it is obvious that the ceremony is about preserving a false idea of who Laura and her family were while carefully avoiding the truth. This is shown through the words of praise for Winifred, who (if Iris is to be believed) was actually a mean person. The politician’s unwillingness to mention the truth of what happened to Laura contributes to this sense of falsehood.*



*This passage indicates that readers of The Blind Assassin likely approach the book with sexist attitudes, almost as if the book ends up being treated as a stand-in for its author. On one hand, readers sexualize it, treating it as a source of gossip, scandal, and “smut” rather than taking it seriously as a work of literature. At the same time, they dismiss it as “thin” and “helpless” in a similar way to how women are stereotypically dismissed as weak.*



*This strange interaction suggests that Iris has a highly vexed relationship to young women, characterized by a mix of regret, fear, envy, and bewilderment. This perhaps implies that Iris’s own youth was fraught and that she’s now unsure of how to relate to young people.*



*In many ways, Iris’s experience is similar to that of any other woman her age. She is consumed by her own memories, the demands of her aging body, and the shock of how much the world around her has changed. At the same time, there are also signs that Iris is facing a unique set of problems on top of these more ordinary ones, as her preoccupation with death and her anxiety about people staring at her suggest that she’s dealing with more serious emotional struggles.*



Iris also went to the Chase family monument in the cemetery, which is taller than all the others. She remembers coming here with Laura and Reenie. Now, Iris comes twice a year in order to “tidy up, if for no other reason.” There are a few flowers left by Laura’s fans. Iris reads the names of those buried there: Benjamin Chase and his wife Adelia; Norval Chase and his wife Liliana; two young men, Edgar and Percival; and Laura. Last week, the newspaper printed a picture of Laura alongside an article about the memorial prize. It is the same photograph that was printed on the book jacket cover of **The Blind Assassin**. In it, Laura looks beautiful but sanitized.

Iris remembers the gossip that circulated around town when Laura’s body was cremated. There is space reserved in the Chase memorial for Iris; Iris’s daughter Aimee is buried with Richard and Winifred at the Griffen memorial in Toronto. Winifred tried to have Laura buried there too, but Iris scattered Laura’s ashes before Winifred got a chance. Iris wonders where Sabrina will be buried, although she’s not even totally sure that Sabrina is still alive. Sabrina ran away for the first time when she was 13; at the time, Winifred accused Iris of being responsible, but in reality Sabrina never chose to contact her grandmother.

It is now summer, and it’s very hot out. Myra tells Iris she should get air conditioning, but Iris can’t afford it. On Iris’s daily walk, she sets off for the button factory. There are two rivers in Port Ticonderoga, the fast-running Louveteau and the much slower Jogues, which is used to transport limestone. A cliff overlooks the Louveteau; every so often a dead body lies at the bottom of it, and it is usually unclear whether the person fell by accident or on purpose. The button factory sits on the east bank of the Louveteau. For many years it was abandoned and “derelict,” before recently being renovated by an “energetic citizens’ committee.” The building now has a sign next to it that reads, “Welcome Button Factory Visitors.”

Inside the factory, waltz music plays and the walls are covered in giant archival photos. An extract from a 1899 newspaper article notes that the factory was not like the “dark Satanic mills of Olde England” but was instead a pleasant and even “enchanted” place. There is a photo of Iris’s grandfather Benjamin from 1901, then her father Norval, standing next to a World War I memorial. There is now a bar in the factory where live music is played on Saturdays and where local microbrewery beer is sold. Myra works in the gift shop, which is filled with sweet-smelling crafts and other items. Myra often gives Iris things from the shop that no one buys. Myra is Reenie’s daughter and, unlike her mother, is religious. Iris buys a cup of coffee and a cookie from the café and sits down.

*This passage illustrates the strange meeting point between Iris’s own personal family history and Laura’s public reputation. The fact that Laura’s fans feel enough admiration and affection that they leave flowers on her grave is moving. But, at the same time, the sanitized image of Laura displayed on her book jacket indicates that Laura’s fans don’t know who she really was. Rather, they consume a distorted version of who she really was, which further supports the idea that there is no singular truth—only subjective, situational narratives.*



*Family plots in cemeteries usually present an impression of a family as a loving, devoted, cohesive unit—yet this passage reveals that in the case of the Chase-Griffen family, this is far from the case. Rather than loving and caring for one another, the family members fight for ownership of one another.*



*The bodies that sometimes appear at the bottom of the Louveteau river spoil any initial impression of Port Ticonderoga as a peaceful, charming place. Indeed, it seems that beneath this exterior, the town has sinister secrets. At the same time, the revamped button factory aims to continue projecting this charming yet contrived image to the outside world.*



*On one level, the renovation of the button shop could be seen as positive and hopeful. Yet it’s worth recognizing that the real history of the factory has been repackaged and glossed over in a way that comes across as dishonest. While the reader doesn’t know much about this place yet, the very fact that it was a factory indicates that it wasn’t the idyllic, cutesy place portrayed by the new museum.*



Iris's grandfather Benjamin built the button factory in the early 1870s. At the time, there was a surge in the Canadian settler population, prompting a demand for clothing and buttons. Benjamin was descended from seventh-generation Puritans who immigrated to Pennsylvania in the 1820s. Founding the factory was relatively easy, as both raw materials and labor were cheaply available. The factory didn't produce beautiful or unusual buttons, but rather the plain, standard, durable kind. The factory's success allowed Benjamin to buy other mills, turning them into more factories, including a knitting factory and ceramic factory. He made a point of keeping his factories orderly, safe, and technologically advanced.

At least, this is the version of the story printed in *The Chase Industries: A History*, a book Benjamin himself commissioned in 1903. Sitting on a bench eating her cookie, Iris feels dizzy and she drops her cane and then her coffee, which spills all over her skirt. Myra sees her and comes rushing over to help.

These days, Iris often has trouble sleeping. In the middle of the night, she goes down to the kitchen to get a snack and suddenly feels as if another person—the house's true owner—is about to arrive and scold her for trespassing. She thinks about how, after she dies, Myra will likely take charge of sorting through her possessions. The day before, Myra drove Iris to buy an electric fan, and on the way they passed **Avilion**, which is now an old people's home with the strange name of Valhalla. It is now a rather grim place, and Iris is the only person who alive who remembers it in its prime. It was spacious, with wooden banisters, a gazebo, a conservatory, a billiards room, a library that featured a marble sculpture of Medusa, and stained-glass windows.

Iris's grandmother Adelia, who died before Iris was born, oversaw the design and construction of **Avilion**. Adelia was from an "established" Montreal French-English family whose fortune dwindled. This led her to marry for "crude money, button money," rather than the preferred option of genteel wealth. Iris thinks about a picture she has of her grandparents, where they both look stiff and uncomfortable. As a young teenager, Iris would "romanticize" Adelia, imagining her as a glamorous woman with a secret lover. However, there was practically no chance that such fantasies could have been true in real life, due to the intense scrutiny and restrictions to which Adelia would have been subjected.

*Overall, it seems that Benjamin was a reasonably fair and conscientious factory owner. At the same time, conditions for factory workers during this time were known to be harsh and underpaid, which implies that the Chase family's success likely depended (at least) somewhat upon the oppression of others.*



*Crucially, the narrative told in the previous passage depicts Benjamin and the button factory in an idealized light. While it may not be entirely false, it likely presents Benjamin according to his own wishes rather than the full truth.*



*The trajectory of Iris's life seems to mirror that of Avilion. Once wealthy and elegant, Iris now has a decidedly humble existence. Moreover, even the house where she lives now doesn't feel like it belongs to her, suggesting that she has long struggled to feel like she has the right to her own money and property.*



*Despite being dead, Adelia looms large in Iris's life. Indeed, the fact that she is dead means she takes an outsize role in Iris's imagination. Because Iris never knew Adelia personally, the image she has of her grandmother is more so based on Iris's dreams and emotions than on reality. Further, the fact that Iris fantasizes about of Adelia having a secret lover suggests that Iris is a romantic at heart.*



Benjamin is 40 when he marries Adelia; he hopes to benefit from her refined taste. **Avilion** is finished in 1889 and is named after the island where King Arthur went to die in a poem by Tennyson. Iris believes the name represented Adelia's own feelings of "exile." She dreamed of traveling and having a rich cultural life, but Benjamin would not leave Port Ticonderoga and Adelia would not go anywhere without him. Adelia was a fan of sculptures and she purchased many that she believed were "authentic" European pieces but were likely fake. Iris wonders if Benjamin might have felt some relief when Adelia died. The house was left preserved in exact state in which Adelia left it, such that Iris and Laura were "brought up by her" even though she was already dead when they were born.

After Benjamin and Adelia are married, they have three sons: Norval is the eldest, followed by Edgar and Percival. Benjamin hoped they would work in the button business, but Adelia dreams of "loftier" ambitions and sends them to Trinity College School in Port Hope, where they learn to feel ashamed of their father and their new-money background. While on vacation from university, Edgar and Percival drive around town and drink beer. It's rumored that they got some girls pregnant and secretly paid for them to have abortions.

Adelia dies of cancer in 1913. During the last month of Adelia's life, Reenie (who is 13 at the time) and her mother start working at **Avilion**. Despite being in great pain, Adelia insists on getting up every day and leaving the house, to the point that she has to be tied to the bed for the sake of her own health. None of her three sons have any interest in the button business; Norval dreams of working in law and then politics. This likely causes tension between Benjamin and the boys.

In the present, Walter assembles Iris's new fan and installs it in her bedroom. In the evening, Iris sits on her porch with the old fan and writes. Iris's parents married in 1914. When Iris was young, she quizzed Reenie about the circumstances of their marriage. Reenie was 16 when she started working at **Avilion** full-time. She'd been Iris's nursemaid, but she stayed on after as a permanent housekeeper. She told Iris that Norval proposed to Iris's mother, Liliana, at an ice-skating party. Because Liliana was Methodist and Norval was Anglican, Liliana was beneath Norval's social class. If Adelia had been alive, she probably would have prevented the marriage from happening.

*Adelia is seemingly made up of contradictions: she is someone with lofty tastes and ambitions, yet she's also profoundly loyal to Benjamin and willing to put aside her own desires in order to be a good wife. Of course, the impression the reader gets of Adelia is all relayed second-hand through Iris. As a result, it is impossible to know whether she was actually as willing to lay aside her own dreams as it seems here—perhaps there is more to the story than Iris knows.*



*Even though Edgar and Percival don't end up being major characters in the book, their behavior that this passage alludes to is important. In contrast to the strict social expectations placed on Adelia, Edgar and Percival are afforded a lot of freedom. They can fully embrace their youth, indulge in fun experiences, and have casual relationships—all while using their wealth to avoid any unintended consequences.*



*The image of Adelia being tied to her bed in order to physically stop her from going out into the world is a rather direct metaphor for how women were generally treated at this time in the early 20th century. Women were generally excluded from the public realm and were instead expected to remain in the domestic sphere. In this case, Adelia is not perceived as having any insight into her own condition; instead, she is treated somewhat like a farm animal.*



*In contrast to Norval's free-wheeling brothers, he has a more respectable story—although this could reflect Reenie's subjective interpretation rather than the actual truth. At the same time, even Norval's decidedly serious and responsible marriage would fall short of the standards set by Adelia simply because it involves crossing a minor difference in social class.*



Liliana was a serious person: at only 18, she was already trained as a teacher. Her father was a lawyer for Chase Industries, and the family was reasonably affluent. Liliana was dedicated to helping the less fortunate and she taught poor people “as a sort of missionary work.” By the time they were engaged, Liliana had known Norval for a while; they’d even starred together as Ferdinand and Miranda in a production of *The Tempest* that Adelia put on in the **Avilion** garden. Norval could have married a richer or more genteel woman, but like Liliana, he was also serious, and Reenie explained that he wanted someone reliable. Iris imagines that Norval’s proposal was probably awkward yet endearing. Liliana would have paused before giving her reply, which meant “yes.”

Reenie’s description of the wedding centers on the Liliana’s outfit and the decorations. One month after the wedding, World War I begins, which dooms Liliana and Norval’s marriage. Norval, Percival, and Edgar enlist in the army immediately and are sent to Bermuda, where they spend a leisurely period playing cricket, apparently desperate to join the real action. Benjamin, whose business profits greatly from the war, nonetheless remains gripped by fear about the fate of his sons and eager for them to return. Liliana moves into **Avilion** and stays there even after Norval leaves; before he’s deployed to France in 1915, Liliana goes to visit him during a stopover in Halifax.

Traveling by train, surrounded by young soldiers, Liliana suddenly realizes it’s possible that Norval might die in the war. Presently, Iris doesn’t know what happened in the few days her mother spent in Halifax. Norval sends Liliana letters from France, parts of which are erased by censors. Meanwhile, back at **Avilion**, Liliana sets to work helping the war effort, recruiting other local women to join her in raising money through rummage sales and knitting garments for the troops. In local hospitals, she tends to soldiers with the very worst injuries. In the present, Iris reflects on her mother’s profound altruism and self-discipline.

Iris herself is born in 1916. Within a month, both Percival and Edgar are killed in France. In August, Benjamin has a stroke that damages his speech and memory, and Liliana becomes his “interpreter,” claiming she is the only person who can understand him. Presently, Iris imagines the frustration Benjamin must have experienced at not being able to communicate and the sadness and confusion triggered by his memory loss. He may not have even understood that two of his sons were dead.

*The fact that Liliana’s pause was taken as a sign that she consented to the marriage is significant. At the time, women’s agency and consent was generally not prioritized, and women were not expected to express strong opinions. As such, it seems that a hesitation was interpreted as enough consent to marry someone. By hesitating, Liliana allowed the decision to remain entirely within Norval’s control.*



*One of the motifs of the novel is the way in which love (in this case, Norval and Liliana’s marriage) is interrupted by war. The characters in the novel are robbed of much control over their romantic lives due to the seismic historical events of the first part of the 20th century, yet they have no choice but to try to keep their lives as close to normal as possible.*



*For some characters, such as Liliana, the intrusion of war into daily life doesn’t trigger lament or self-pity—instead, it is simply another path through which they can keep dedicating themselves to working on behalf of the vulnerable.*



*It is important to note that Iris is born into a chaotic, tragic time for her family. It must have been difficult to celebrate the news of her birth when it was accompanied by two deaths and a debilitating stroke. In a sense, this sets a precedent of Iris existing on the sidelines of life, observing rather than participating in the main action.*



Presently, Iris sees news of extreme flooding on the weather channel and thinks about how “greed” is driving climate change. Returning to the story of her family, she jumps ahead to November 11, 1918—Armistice Day. Norval was wounded at the Somme, but he survived and was promoted to second lieutenant. Upon returning home, he’s greeted as a hero. He lost one eye and the function of one leg; Iris thinks that the amount that had changed for both him and Liliانا must have been overwhelming for them. Iris imagines an awkward reunion and she believes her mother must have realized that Norval had had sex with other women while he was at war.

Liliana prays for the ability to forgive Norval for his infidelities, yet still feels jealous of all the other women who have been around him, even the nurses that tended to him in hospital. Back in **Avilion**, she busies herself caring for her husband, who—to her horror—has become an atheist. He rejects the idea that he and all the other soldiers were “fighting for God and Civilization”—although, out of sensitivity for Liliانا’s feelings, he avoids mentioning this except when he’s been drinking. Norval attempts to cure his trauma with alcohol, although he tries to hide the extent of his drinking from Liliانا in order to avoid scaring her. As a child, Iris is afraid of him even though she doesn’t believe he would ever actually hurt her.

Iris explains that it wasn’t the case that her parents didn’t love each other—they were just estranged from each other. Before long, Norval starts getting the train into Toronto, where he drinks and womanizes. Iris explains that no one ever told her this outright, but that it was possible to absorb information via the silences in her household growing up. Following the death of his brothers, Norval decides it’s his responsibility to take over the family business and he hopes to have sons of his own who will do the same. He makes a point of employing veterans, hiring too many people even after the economy crashes. He becomes known as a “fool.” Presently, Iris observes that while she has some superficial similarities to Norval, really it is he and Laura who are linked, because both of them were capable of suicide.

Iris recalls an evening in 1919 when she was sitting in with Norval and Liliانا, who was mending dresses. In five years’ time, Liliانا would be dead. Iris read to her parents, although she doubted that her father was listening. Soon after, Laura was born.

*Like almost all couples divided by World War I, Liliانا and Norval faced a difficult reunion. This is largely because the traumas of the war were so intense—however, as Iris points out at the end of this passage, other factors played a part too. While on the front, soldiers like Norval may well have taken advantage of a slightly looser moral climate (and may have wanted to take advantage of whatever distraction they could get). Understandably, this could be difficult for the wives left behind on the home front.*



*Liliana feels overly jealous of the women around Norval and she struggles to deal with his loss of faith. This shows that, for all of Liliانا’s admirable, altruistic qualities, she is not a saint—rather, she’s a flawed human with problems like anyone else. Indeed, perhaps the extent to which Liliانا continues to play the role of the devoted, selfless woman during the war makes it extra hard for her to cope with Norval’s newfound recklessness and nihilism.*



*The fact that Norval is ridiculed for hiring veterans reveals the corrupted values in the society in which he lives. Rather than admiring those who care for the weak, these people are ostracized, likely in order to make the more selfish members of society feel better about themselves. Of course, Norval is not a perfect man, as is made very clear in this passage. Yet one of the messages of this part of the novel is that imperfect people are still capable of profound acts of good.*



*This decidedly ordinary family scene is bookended by tragedy: World War I on one side and Liliانا’s premature death on the other. Further, given that Iris’s childhood begins in such so proximity to the war, to her younger sister’s birth, and to her mother’s death, it’s likely that she grew up feeling overshadowed and overlooked.*



In the present day, Iris thinks about how heart, which keeps her alive, will one day be the thing that kills her, which she believes is how love works, too. She goes to the cemetery again, and on the way home she stops at a doughnut shop. While there, she goes to the bathroom, where she sees words scribbled on the toilet stall door. One of the lines is a quote by Laura: “All Gods Are Carnivorous.”

According to Reenie, Laura’s birth was long and difficult, and at times it seemed like she was going to die as a newborn. Following the birth, Liliana was left weak and unwell. Laura was an “anxious” infant, scared of many things and easily distressed, but strangely tolerant of physical pain. Iris thinks about her mother’s death and how it is both accurate and inaccurate to say that it “changed everything.” It began on Tuesday, which was “bread day,” the occasion when Reenie produced all the bread for the rest of the week.

When Iris and Laura are young, Reenie gives the girls leftover dough from her baking so that they can make bread men with raisins for eyes—until she finds out that Laura hasn’t been eating hers but instead hoarding them in a drawer. Following this discovery, Laura holds “mass burial” for all the bread men she’s forced to throw away. During the burial, Reenie comments that she has sympathy for Laura’s future husband because Laura is stubborn, but Laura replies that she’s never going to get married. Reenie scoffs at this, pointing out that Laura is too accustomed to living a comfortable life to refuse marriage and indicating that she wouldn’t survive on her own.

Liliana never usually wastes food, always compelling her daughters to think of the less fortunate, but that day she can’t eat her bread crusts. Iris instantly knows something is terribly wrong. Lately, Liliana has been knitting in the afternoon and she usually falls asleep, which is also unusual for her. Reenie compares human reproduction to the bread she bakes, yet although Iris was old enough to know that people aren’t made from dough, she still doesn’t understand how they’re actually conceived. That Tuesday morning, Liliana sits drinking tea while Reenie makes the bread. It’s hot outside, and the kitchen is even hotter because of the oven. Reenie offers Laura some dough for a bread man, but Laura refuses it.

*Iris’s view of love may be cynical, but it is also certainly romantic—she is not a pragmatist who dismisses the power of love. Rather, she believes that love has enormous—and tragic—power.*



*This passage suggests that there may be a connection between the fact that Liliana almost died giving birth to Laura and the fact that Laura was an anxious child. Even aside from Liliana’s health scare, Laura was born into a highly troubled family environment beset by tragedy—it’s no wonder that she absorbed some of the emotions that arose as a result.*



*This passage contains two key pieces of information about Laura’s personality: firstly, she abstains from eating, which could potentially stem from her anxiety. Second, Laura is a highly emotional and sensitive person, as demonstrated by the fact that she insists on holding a “burial” for the dough men she didn’t eat.*



*The fact that the information about how human reproduction works is withheld from Iris indicates that the world in which she lives is quite conservative, and that it is particularly prudish about women’s sexuality. According to the social norms of the time, women like Iris were expected to enter marriage not only virgins, but essentially ignorant about human sex and reproduction worked. Given Liliana’s own difficulties with pregnancy, it’s clear that this lack of knowledge can have dangerous consequences.*



Iris and Laura are under the table when suddenly they hear Liliana collapse and her teacup smash. Reenie tells Iris to get Norval, but Iris can't find him. When Iris returns to the kitchen, she sees blood on the floor and tells Laura not to look at it. Later, she overhears Reenie talking to the laundrywoman, named Mrs. Hillcoate, about how Liliana's last pregnancy almost killed her and how the doctor had thus warned her about not getting pregnant again. Tiptoeing away, Iris and Laura encounter a basket outside Liliana's room that contains the deformed baby she miscarried. Iris tries to hurry Laura away, but to her surprise Laura remains calm and remarks sympathetically, "It's not finished [...] It didn't want to get itself born."

Later that day, Reenie takes Iris and Laura to see Liliana, who's sleeping with a strange expression on her face. Lillian's eyes open, and Reenie tells the girls they can hug her gently, which they do. Five days later, Liliana dies. In the days leading up to her death, Iris had only been able to see her for brief visits. On the last of these, Liliana told Iris to be a good sister to Laura, and Iris wondered if Liliana loved Laura more than her. Iris feels that she can't live up to her mother's request; she's often cruel to Laura. However, doesn't want to ruin the idea of her that Liliana had in her head.

In the present, Iris wonders why people want to "memorialize" themselves, a process that starts before death through things like photographs, diplomas, and monogrammed linen. These items convey a desire for others to "witness" people's lives. The day after Liliana's funeral, Reenie sends Iris and Laura out into the garden, her face flushed by crying. The funeral reception had been a formal, "respectable" event. Reenie had braided the girls' hair tightly with black ribbon.

Laura seems confused by the ritual of grief, but when the adults remark that she's too young to understand death, Laura replies that she isn't sad because "Mother is with God." Laura's faith is always more sturdy and unequivocal than that of others. In the garden, Iris tells Laura to stop singing because Liliana is dead. Laura replies that this isn't really true because their mother is "in Heaven with the little baby," and Iris pushes her off the ledge they're sitting on. Laura starts crying and runs away, and Iris runs after her.

*This horrifying scene illuminates the brutal and often frightening nature of motherhood, particularly in a world in which knowledge and access to women's healthcare was restricted. The experience of seeing the stillborn baby that their mother birthed would assumedly be profoundly traumatizing for Iris and Laura. Laura's calm reaction is therefore rather mysterious, suggesting that while she overreacts to minor issues, she is paradoxically able to cope with major trauma in a calm manner.*



*Liliana's request that Iris be a good sister to Laura is profoundly important. Thanks to the newspaper article at the very beginning of the novel, the reader already knows that Laura ends up committing suicide at a young age. Of course, this doesn't necessarily mean that Iris fails to live up to the promise she makes her mother—yet one can see how Iris herself might feel that way.*



*Reenie's deep and profound love for Liliana is important. Following Liliana's death, Reenie becomes a surrogate mother figure to Iris and Laura, and the fact that she is able to do this surely depends on the affection and loyalty she felt for Liliana and the Chase family as a whole.*



*Throughout the novel, Laura ends up alienated from the people around her because she takes religious teachings on too literal a manner. Of course, Laura's reaction to Liliana's death is aligned with Christian teaching—if one is totally certain that families are reunited in heaven, then it's arguably strange to be too sad about death. Yet few people have the certainty of faith Laura possesses.*



About a month after Lilitiana's death, Norval takes Iris into town without Laura. While they walk, Norval tells Iris that he'll buy her a soda from Betty's Luncheonette. Previously, Iris understood that it would be improper for her to go to this establishment, which was frequented by the lower-class "townspeople." She also isn't usually allowed to drink soda. Once they get there, however, Iris can tell by the way that Norval speaks to the waitress that he comes there often. Norval tells Iris that she must promise to take care of Laura if something happens, which confused Iris, though she nods in agreement.

Norval then begins a discussion about buttons, telling Iris it's time she learns to understand "the simple principles of economics." Iris has heard Norval call the button factory "a trap" and "a jinx" while he was drunk, but now he's discussing it seriously. When Norval asks Iris if she understands what he's explaining, Iris lies and says that she does. Before Lilitiana died, she'd told Iris, "Underneath it all, your father loves you." Lilitiana rarely said things like this, usually only discussing love in a religious context. In a way, her statement felt less like reassurance and more like a burden.

*This passage indicates that Norval is living a different reality beneath the appearance of respectability and propriety he's supposed to maintain. Norval may be a factory owner, but he is unafraid of socializing among the working-class residents of Port Ticonderoga. While many today might argue that this is a sign of good character, at the time it would have been seen as improper and even scandalous.*



*Norval's resentment of the button factory conveys the idea that inheritance can be a burden, even when that inheritance takes the form of property and wealth. Indeed, in the same way that Iris and Laura ended up trapped in the image of ideal womanhood Adelia wanted for them, Norval feels trapped by the button factory.*



## CHAPTER 4

In **The Blind Assassin**, the woman arrives at a café, where the man is already waiting for her. He chastises the woman for wearing such a fancy coat and thereby drawing attention to herself, to which she replies that it's just "an ordinary raincoat." They have an argument about kindness, which the man denounces as reprehensible—he says that he'd rather the woman be selfish than kind.

The man indicates that he's still in hiding, on the run from an unspecified authority. He explains that the café is run by a friend of a friend and that he's watching the door in case he needs to escape through the back. The woman asks the man if he "did it," and he indicates that he didn't but that he "could have" because he was present. He says he's being targeted as a scapegoat by people who don't like him and his "bad ideas." The woman says she's worried about him, and he replies with vulgar comments about her body.

*The man and woman spend much of their rendezvous fighting. Although their arguments usually have a flirtatious tone, underneath this lies the real issue of the class tensions between them.*



*The Blind Assassin is written in a vague enough way that this scene could depict all kinds of different scenarios. As the novel progresses, it will become more clear what is being represented here. What is clear thus far is that the woman has a higher class status than the man and that the man is on the run from some kind of authority.*



An article in the *Port Ticonderoga Herald and Banner* from March 16, 1933 details Captain Norval Chase's support of the relief effort for those impoverished by the Depression. Norval is quoted as arguing that the country must come together to alleviate the crisis in the same way it did during the war. Meanwhile, the knitwear manufacturer Richard E. Griffen has publicly criticized Norval for "depriving the working man of wages" by giving his products away for free. The article also notes that Chase Industries has suffered as a result of the Depression and is struggling to keep its factories open without resorting to layoffs. Meanwhile, strikebreaking in other parts of the country has resulted in union riots and "Communist-inspired bloodshed."

In **The Blind Assassin**, the man takes the woman to the dingy house belonging to a friend where he's currently staying. They kiss, and the man leads the woman upstairs to his room on the third floor. It is obvious that he's made an effort to make the bed look nice, smoothing out the chenille spread that lies on top of it, which gives the woman a painful feeling of sympathy for him. The man offers her from scotch, and she accepts. She playfully points out that he has been extra cruel to her that day, and he replies that it's in "self-defence." After they have sex, the woman thinks about how easy it would be for someone to kick down the door. They smoke, and the man asks if the woman wants to hear a "bedtime story."

A December 5, 1934 article in *The Mail and Empire* describes Richard Griffen's praise for Prime Minister R. B. Bennett, who recently violently suppressed a gathering of communists in Toronto. Many of those arrested were imprisoned or deported. Griffen also expresses his disapproval of the "soft socialism" being implemented by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the U.S.

In **The Blind Assassin**, the man returns to the story of Zycron: he describes a dark night, after all three of the planet's suns have set. A girl, who is about to be sacrificed, is lying on a bed in the Temple. The bed she is lying on is officially called "the Bed of One Night," but the girls call it "the Bed of Voiceless Tears." According to myth, each girl is visited by the Lord of the Underworld the night before she is sacrificed so that she won't die a virgin, a feared category on Zycron. Women who die virgins are said to become spirits who prey on men and turn them into "obedient zombies."

*This newspaper article sets the scene for the next section of the main narrative. During the Great Depression, people at all income levels lost money and struggled to maintain financial stability. At the same time, those hit hardest by the Depression were not factory owners like Norval and Richard, but rather low-wage workers. These workers became unemployed by the millions, and many of them had no savings or property and were supporting large families, leading to desperate circumstances.*



*While the man is often depicted as being somewhat callous and even sometimes cruel to the woman, the effort he makes in this passage shows that he has a gentler side and cares about her feelings, too. Indeed, the fact that he makes this effort despite being on the run and having to rely on the charity of friends for somewhere to sleep makes him an even more sympathetic character.*



*Richard clearly favors right-wing politics and the violent oppression of communists. Like many wealthy manufacturers, he prioritizes his own class interests over the wellbeing of workers.*



*Several of Atwood's novels focus on the forms of sexual violence to which women are subjected—and particularly the violent fetishization of ruining a woman's purity. In this case, raping the girl who is about to be sacrificed is seen as a special privilege and pleasure for the Lord of the Underworld. The fact that this takes place in a story within Laura's novel perhaps suggests that Laura herself may have witnessed or experienced a sexual assault at some point.*



The girls know that the Lord of the Underworld isn't real—he's really just a courtier who disguises himself and pays for the privilege of raping them the night before they are killed. At this moment, a group of "barbarians" are preparing to attack **Sakiel-Norn** and burn it down. They do not have technology, wealth, literacy, or a king on their side—only a leader called the Servant of Rejoicing. Other people call this tribe the People of Desolation, but they call themselves the People of Joy. The Servant of Rejoicing believes that he received a message from the gods instructing him to destroy Sakiel-Norn. The People of Joy believe that all the inhabitants of Sakiel-Norn are "tainted" by luxury, ritual sacrifice, and the "worship of false gods."

The inhabitants of **Sakiel-Norn** are unaware of the approach of the People of Joy. Inside the city, a group of courtiers are planning to overthrow the King with the help of the best blind assassin. His mission is to kill the girl about to be sacrificed in the Temple, dress in her clothes, and await the Lord of the Underworld, who is the courtier leading the revolt. However, the timing has been messed up—currently, the blind assassin will get to the girl before the courtier. The woman interrupts the man to say the story is getting too gruesome, but he reminds her that he is a professional writer and that she should be "grateful" to get one of his stories for free.

The man continues in his description of the plot, explaining that the blind assassin believes he will be rewarded with a generous fee and that he plans to escape in the aftermath of the murder, when the plotters will be ruthlessly suppressed and order will be restored. However, in reality, the loyalists who hired the blind assassin intend to kill him as soon as he has performed the task for which they hired him. Arriving at the temple, the blind assassin kills the female sentry guarding the door and he lets himself inside.

The man and woman hear a sound, and the man asks the woman to put on a slip so that she can look out the window and see what's going on. The woman objects but eventually does so, and she assures the man that there's "nothing out of the ordinary" outside. The man asks her to come back to bed, but she says she has to go.

A 1934 article in *The Mail and Empire* describes a strike and lockout taking place at Chase and Sons Industries Ltd. After police were outnumbered by the striking workers, the army was called in to subdue them. Before they accomplished this, the strikers rioted, looted, and started a fire that killed a night watchman. The editor of the Port Ticonderoga newspaper claims that the riot only turned violent after "outside agitators" gave the strikers liquor. Norval Chase declined to comment.

*Although the story of Sakiel-Norn is set on an alien planet, it draws on real human history. The ritual rape of virgins and fighting based on conflicting religious views have historically occurred in many cultures on Earth. Furthermore, the idea that Sakiel-Norn and its inhabitants are tainted by luxury and corrupt values helps emphasize the possible parallel between the fictional city and the world in which the man telling the story lives. As a radical leftist, he perhaps believes that there are societies in the real world that have similarly been corrupted by wealth and greed.*



*The fact that the woman interrupts the man to protest about how brutal the story is could be taken as evidence that she is sheltered and sensitive due to her class position. At the same time, it may also be the case that the man is titillated by his own story of rape and murder in a way that the woman finds morally objectionable.*



*Despite the blind assassin's extraordinary skill, which makes him valuable to the people who hire him, he is ultimately treated as disposable due to his status as a formerly enslaved Ygnirod, the lowest cast position in the Sakiel-Norn hierarchy.*



*Retreating into a fantasy world of science fiction is appealing to the man and woman due to the tense and bleak nature of their real-life surroundings.*



*There is no doubt that the striking workers perpetuated serious violence, as shown most clearly by the fact that the fire they started killed a man. At the same time, the desperate circumstances of the Depression and the injustice of wealth inequality arguably make the violence more understandable (though, of course, not excusable).*



In **The Blind Assassin**, this week the man is staying in a different house owned by a wealthier friend. The woman worries about this friend knowing that she's there—and, even worse, knowing her identity. The man stares at the woman, and when she asks why, he replies that he is memorizing what she looks like so that he can recall it later, after he's "gone." They lie in bed together, talking and teasing each other flirtatiously. The man continues with his story. The People of Joy have set up camp one day's march away from **Sakiel-Norn**. Enslaved women pour the men stew and alcohol while the "official wives" sit separately. The men nervously await the following day. They are afraid of losing, and although they might not admit it, they do not approach killing with relish.

A 1935 article from the magazine *Mayfair* entitled "Toronto High Noon Gossip" describes a reception hosted by Mrs. Winifred Griffen Prior in honor of Iris's engagement to Richard Griffen, Winifred's brother and "one of the most eligible bachelors in the province." According to the article, it was a lavish affair, with many esteemed guests in attendance.

In the man's story in **The Blind Assassin**, the bronze bell in **Sakiel-Norn** tolls at midnight, signifying a myth about the Broken God that no one believes anymore. Alone in his tower, the King takes off his platinum face mask and smiles, thinking about an affair he's been conducting with "the plump wife of a minor civil servant." The woman has become irritating, so he resolves to destroy her husband's finances, which will force him to sell her into slavery. The King hears the bell toll in the distance but doesn't think much about it, as he has lost his faith like everyone else. He wonders if the rumors of the latest plot to kill him are true. He sees a flash of light in the distance and thinks it must be lightning.

The woman expresses pity for the King, and the man suggests they get another drink. He says that all kings deserve to die, and the woman complains that the whisky he buys is cheap and awful. The man gets up and, still naked, he attempts to pee out the window, which horrifies the woman. He tells her to put on his friend's dressing gown to disguise herself while she goes out to the toilet. When they are done, the man resumes the story. He describes the blind assassin's state of mind in the buildup to the assassination: he feels nervous about his own safety but untroubled by the murder he is about to commit.

*While much of the novel (and, again, Atwood's work more broadly) depicts the brutal and horrifying ways in which gender-based oppression harms women, this passage considers how men can be harmed by gendered social codes as well. The male fighters of the People of Joy feel pressured to pretend that they are brave and enthusiastic about the prospect of killing people, when really this is not the case. This detail brings to mind the millions of men compelled to fight in World Wars I and II (like Norval and his brothers in the main narrative).*



*Considering that Richard hasn't even been introduced in the main narrative yet, this turn of events may come as something of a surprise to the reader—although the articles at the beginning of the novel did show that Richard and Iris were married. Richard and Iris's high class status and lavish wedding is reminiscent of Adelia and Benjamin's, which creates a sense of generational repetition.*



*The depiction of the King of Sakiel-Norn here is certainly not sympathetic. It illustrates the ways in which those with power—not only monarchs but also the upper classes and wealthy elite more generally—tend to abuse that power for their own amusement. This is demonstrated by the fact that the King wants to see the woman with whom he's been having an affair sold into slavery.*



*This passage further explores the class differences between the man and woman and the way this impacts their relationship. The woman feels sympathy for the King despite the fact that he seems to be a despotic ruler who abuses her own power, whereas the man opposes anyone who has unjustly earned power (or perhaps anyone who has too much power at all).*



## CHAPTER 5

In the present day, a tornado approaches Port Ticonderoga, and Iris remembers the advice Reenie used to give about never speaking on the phone or having a bath during a thunderstorm. After it passes, Iris gets up in the middle of the night, unable to sleep again. She goes outside, feeling bold for doing so. She thinks about Myra's warnings about muggers who come from Toronto and target old ladies. She hears footsteps behind her and turns to see a young woman, who for a second she thinks is Sabrina. However, just as Iris feels overcome with happiness, she realizes it is not Sabrina after all.

Returning to **Avilion**, Iris describes Liliana's sealskin coat that she and Laura would play with after their mother's death. Eventually, someone gives the coat to charity. After Lilian dies, Laura asks questions about the stillborn baby and she won't accept the answers Reenie gives her. Liliana's funeral shook Laura's faith in God and she suddenly needs to know "God's exact location." She feels conscious of being constantly watched by God and worried that He will do something terrible like in the Old Testament of the Bible. Sometimes, at night, Laura wakes Iris up by snoring, and Iris sneaks off to the garden by herself. Like most children, Iris believes that she's to blame for everything bad that happened—yet also that a "happy ending" is sure to come.

Iris helps Laura get dressed in the morning, and the girls spend a lot of time alone together exploring **Avilion**. Winter comes and the Louveteau freezes; the sound of children playing in the snow can be heard all around. In the spring, a woman jumps off the Jubilee Bridge and her body is torn apart in the defrosted river. Mrs. Hillcoate mentions another woman who'd killed herself jumping off the bridge because she'd gotten pregnant from an extramarital affair. In June, Iris turns 10. One day, Iris overhears Reenie saying that Liliana had been a "saint on earth" and that she's concerned that Laura will be forced to grow up too quickly by spending so much time around Iris.

Back in the present, Iris walks to the bank early in the morning. She feels like everyone there hates her for the fact that she was once wealthy but no longer is (even though, as she points out, this wealth never technically belonged to her but instead to her father and husband). On the way home from the bank, she passes the Town Hall, which is adorned with two statues. One of them was commissioned by Adelia to memorialize the American colonel who named Port Ticonderoga, and the other was a "mythic figure" called the Weary Soldier commissioned by Norval. Controversially, he recruited a young female sculptor named Callista Fitzsimmons to make it.

*Iris has come to feel somewhat helpless in her old age, not only due to her physical frailty but also her diminished social status and isolation. Perhaps for this reason, she is consumed by thoughts of her mother-figure, Reenie, and she remains closely attached to Reenie's daughter. Even though Myra is younger, Iris seems to take on a parental attitude toward her—perhaps because Aimee's death and Sabrina's absence have left Iris with a sense of emptiness.*



*Throughout the novel, some of Laura's behavior indicates that she may be suffering from mental health problems. In this passage, her devout religious faith turns into a kind of paranoia about being watched. However, Laura's anxieties could be due to the nature of what she has been taught to believe. After all, Christianity generally teaches that God is everywhere, all-powerful, and always watching and judging—it is arguably unsurprising that this might spark fear in a child.*



*This suicide at Jubilee Bridge foreshadows Laura's own death, as the reader knows that Laura drives off a bridge when she's 25. Additionally, the fact that the woman was pregnant by an affair gives the reader a sense of how important social expectations were to women during this time—this woman clearly believed that killing herself and her unborn baby would be preferable to enduring the shame of bearing a child born out of wedlock.*



*This passage continues to explore the theme of sexist oppression. In particular, it illuminates what a strange experience it must be for Iris to have lived across the span of the 20th century and witnessed the profound changes to women's status that occurred during this time.*



When young Iris meets Callista, who goes by Callie, the sculptor is 28 and striking. Before long, Callie comes to visit every weekend. Norval seems happier, drinks less, and occasionally throws small parties attended by Callie's bohemian friends from Toronto. He and Callie also go on dates, sometimes staying away for days at a time. Iris is "in awe" of Callie due to her beauty, creativity, and power, but Reenie dismisses her as "one of the floozies." She and Mrs. Hillcoate disapprovingly discuss a rumor that Callie has gone skinny-dipping, and Reenie calls her a "gold-digger."

The Weary Soldier is also met with objections for being too depressing, rather than victorious. Yet Norval refuses to change the figure's expression or to emblazon it with a triumphant phrase, instead opting for, "Les We Forget." The sculpture is finished and unveiled on November 11, 1928. During the ceremony, there are prayers and sermons, and Norval is given the role of laying the first wreath. After, Iris watches him and notices that he's shaking with emotion. Once the ceremony is over, Laura asks Reenie and Mrs. Hillcoate many questions about the idea of sacrificing oneself in the war. Reenie assures Laura that she'll understand when she's older.

A week later, Laura slips into the Louveteau while she and Iris are walking beside it. After Iris manages to get Laura out, she accuses her of jumping in on purpose. Bawling, Laura says she did it "So God would let Mother be alive again." Iris knows the only way to counter this logic is to argue that God wants Laura to be alive, which is why He allowed Iris to save her. That night, Iris is kept awake by thoughts of how easily she could have let her sister go.

Iris and Laura don't go to school but instead have tutors, whom they treat with hostility. Craving independence, they sneak into town whenever they can, heedless of Reenie's warnings about the dangers that lurk there. One of Reenie's brothers is involved with smuggling magazines in from across the American border. Iris and Laura delight in reading the science-fiction volumes he supplies, precisely because they are, in Reenie's words, "like nothing on earth." They feel both "grateful" and left out due to not attending the local public school. One of their tutors, Miss Violet Goreham, is a 41-year-old woman whom Iris secretly nicknames Miss Violence. Reenie mentions that Miss Violence is an "old maid," explaining that this means that she doesn't have a husband. Reenie adds that it's obvious no man has ever shown interest in her.

*During this period, a new generation of women were choosing to resist the strict social expectations placed on them and live lives characterized by independence, pleasure, and freedom. It is these women whom Reenie dismissively calls "floozies" (an antiquated derogatory term for a promiscuous woman). This highlights the important fact that women faced scorn from other women, not just from men, for violating gender norms.*



*Although Callie is rebellious in a more obvious way than Norval, it is significant that they connect over the Weary Soldier sculpture that he commissions her to make. In depicting the soldier as dejected rather than triumphant, Norval rebels against the demand to whitewash the grim realities of war—a significant act of transgression against expectations to be patriotic and pro-war.*



*Throughout Laura's life, she turns toward acts of self-sacrifice as a method of helping others. As is made clear in this passage, this is not usually a very helpful tactic. However, people often turn to self-harm and self-sacrifice when they feel completely powerless, which is arguably true of Laura.*



*Considering the repressive nature of the girls' lives, it is unsurprising that Iris and Laura seek escape in science fiction. Indeed, the growth in popularity of science fiction over the course of the 20th century has an interesting relationship with the changing nature of social life on Earth and, in particular, the increase in the rights of women and minorities. Imagining different worlds that were "like nothing on earth" helped people conceive of their own new ways of life, free of oppression and deterministic ways of thinking.*



Miss Violence gives the girls more freedom than the other tutors—for example, by letting Iris pick the books she wants to read herself. She often speaks about the themes of “boundless love” and “hopeless melancholy” in the literature they read. Miss Violence sighs when moved by what they read, and Iris feels that the woman belongs in **Avilion** with its outdated, fading grandeur and its sense of wistfulness and regret. Miss Violence likes reading romantic novels that she borrows from the library and looking through Adelia’s scrapbooks. Iris and Laura grow to like her. When she leaves, she cries, but the girls don’t.

After Iris turns 13, Norval begins intervening in the way she dresses, speaks, and carries herself. He feels that she’s been given too much freedom and that now she needs to be restrained. At the time, Iris doesn’t understand why she’s suddenly being subjected to this extra discipline, as she’s done nothing wrong. When Iris gets her first period, she tells Callie, convinced she’s dying. Callie explains that it isn’t serious and suggests that Iris call it “my friend” or “a visitor,” but Reenie refers to it as “the curse.” When Laura sees a bloodstain on Iris’s bed, she weeps, thinking that Iris is going to die like Liliana. In a photograph taken during this time, both girls are smiling, but it is obvious that they are doing so because otherwise they would get in trouble.

After Miss Violence’s departure, Norval laments that there are gaps in the girls’ education, particularly on more challenging subjects. He employs a new tutor, Mr. Erskine, who previously taught at a boy’s school in England. Mr. Erskine is much stricter than Miss Violence and regularly resorts to corporal punishment. He’s merciless and sarcastic, which confuses Laura. Reenie is horrified about Mr. Erskine’s behavior when the girls tell her about it, but he dismisses her when she tries to speak to him. The girls do end up gaining knowledge from his lessons, albeit in a painful way. One day, Laura placidly tells Iris that Mr. Erskine often puts his hands down her shirt or into her panties. Iris is stunned, and Laura immediately observes that Iris doesn’t believe her.

*The novel’s sympathetic portrayal of Miss Violence serves as a reminder that those who are dismissed and excluded by society—including “old maids” like Miss Violence—often have fascinating and appealing attributes that get missed due to judgment. Furthermore, while Miss Violence is looked down upon for never marrying, she leads the kind of independent life that both Iris and Laura crave.*



*This chaotic passage again emphasizes how damaging it is to suppress information about women’s bodies and reproduction—particularly from women themselves. Even the progressive and bohemian Callie brushes Iris off and tells her to refer to her period by a euphemism rather than properly explaining menstruation, which highlights the limits of liberal attitudes toward women’s bodies at the time.*



*This is a key moment in the novel, the interpretation of which will likely have a decisive impact on the extent of the sympathy the reader extends toward Iris later in the novel. On one level, Iris’s decision not to believe Laura could be read as an unforgivable betrayal, particularly considering Laura is the younger sister and Iris is supposed to be looking after her. At the same time, perhaps Laura’s calm delivery of her confession confused Iris, who, after all, is still a child herself at this time.*



Reenie, however, immediately believes Laura, and she ensures Mr. Erskine is fired by claiming to have found pornographic material in his room. Watching Reenie denounce Mr. Erskine for his lustful nature makes one of the workers at the button factory, Ron Hincks, fall in love with her. Laura feels that God answered her prayers to be saved from Mr. Erskine. She briefly considers becoming a nun, although Reenie persuades her out of it. Meanwhile, the Great Depression has a negative (although not devastating) impact on Chase Industries, and austerity arrives at **Avilion**. Iris turns 16 and her formal schooling ends. Reenie reads *Mayfair* magazine, dreaming of Avilion's former genteel glory. Iris knows that if Adelia were still alive, she would have a host of helpful advice for her.

In the present day, Labour Day has passed and milder weather has arrived, making it easier to walk. Still, Iris accepts a lift from Myra when she drives up and offers to bring her to the Camp Grounds. The park is dirty and strewn with drug paraphernalia, condoms, and other litter. Yet in the past, it was well tended, a place where religious meetings took place as well as the Chase and Sons Labour Day Celebration. On this day, there would be games, music, food, and general "hijinks." During the Depression, the once lively atmosphere of the celebration dims a little. On this day, Norval's speech encourages attendees to remain hopeful about the future. Iris and Laura are there, in outfits carefully chosen by Reenie to be neither too fancy nor too informal.

For the first time in the history of the Labour Day picnic, Norval "stumbled" while delivering his speech. Afterward, Iris helps Reenie with the bake sale. Iris asks Laura to come too, but when Laura says no Iris didn't insist, even though she's supposed to be taking care of her. Iris is tired of always having to look out for Laura and she fantasizes about going off on travels and adventures herself. She worries that if she stays in Port Ticonderoga, she'll become an "old maid" like Miss Violence.

A fight breaks out, and the editor of the local newspaper, Elwood Murray, is knocked to the floor. Murray is generally considered a "fool" and a "pansy" because he's fairly old and still unmarried. People also object to his "nosy" behavior. Norval comes over, accompanied by an elegant man Iris has never seen before. Reenie calls the man "Mr. Royal Classic," a nickname derived from the fact that he owns Royal Classic Knitwear. His real name is Richard Griffen and he's Norval's rival, so it's surprising that he's at the picnic. Reenie is horrified to hear that Norval has invited Richard to dinner at **Avilion** on very short notice, giving her little time to prepare for what will have to be an impressive occasion.

*Reenie's intervention in this moment is crucial. It shows that she is ready to protect and support Iris and Laura even if this jeopardizes her own position (which would have been possible, considering she had to resort to planting pornographic material in Mr. Erskine's room). Yet while Reenie's act is heartwarming, it is deeply tragic that telling Norval the truth about Mr. Erskine molesting Laura was seemingly not considered an option. In such an environment of secrecy and repression, it is easy for abuse to occur.*



*The fact that Iris and Laura wear carefully-selected outfits that are neither too fancy nor too casual to the Labour Day picnic highlights the hypocrisy of their social class. Throughout the rest of the novel, the Chase family and others like them make sure to display their wealth (even if this is done in understated ways). Yet now that workers are facing increased poverty and exploitation due to the Depression, the family pretends to be more humble than it really is, likely to avoid resistance.*



*Iris's feelings normal, as most teenage girls dream of independence and adventure for themselves. The fact that Iris faces the additional responsibility of taking care of a highly sensitive, unpredictable younger sister likely makes her feel even more constrained than she otherwise would. Still, some might argue that she is irresponsible to leave Laura unattended.*



*At the time a "pansy" was a derogatory term used to describe gay men; it expressed prejudice not only against men who had sex with men but also men who had feminine characteristics. This passage indicates that the legitimate objections to Elwood Murray (i.e., to his nosiness) were mixed in with baseless prejudice about his sexuality.*



Gossiping about Richard, Reenie claims that he's "new money" and that he's gained his fortune by "cheating the Jews." Iris notices a slender, luxuriously-dressed woman who she believes is Richard's wife walking with him. Reenie scolds Iris for losing Laura, although Iris quickly finds her sitting with a young man on the grass dressed in a "proletarian mode." Laura introduces him as Alex Thomas, explaining that he is a friend of Callie's. When Iris mentions Richard, Alex called him "the sweatshop tycoon." Alex offers Iris a cigarette, and she accepts. Elwood Murray comes over and takes a photograph of the three of them. Reenie then comes rushing over, saying that Richard is looking for the girls. She scolds them for sitting with strangers and smoking.

Laura said that the stranger is Alex Thomas, explaining that he recently dropped out of divinity school after losing his faith. Reenie reacts with suspicion, asking "who is he," which means she wants to know who Alex's family is. Laura replies that he's an orphan who was adopted from an orphanage by a minister and his wife. Reenie exclaims, "An orphan! [...] He could be anybody!" To Reenie's further horror, Laura then announces that she invited him to dinner.

The Labour Day dinner has stuck in Iris's memory because "it was the only time all of us were ever in the same room together." In preparation, Reenie consults a cookbook called *The Boston Cooking-School Cookbook*, which had once belonged to Adelia. It begins with an epigraph by John Ruskin, which characterizes women across history and geography as "loaf givers." Grumbling about Alex, Reenie says that he looked like "some half-breed Indian, or else a gypsy." Norval, meanwhile, warns Laura that she needs to stop extending charitable invitations to strangers. However, Callie assures Norval that Alex is "all right."

Iris helps set the table, seating Alex next to herself. Although Laura is considered too young to attend a dinner, she had invited a guest and is was reluctantly permitted to join. Neither of the girls are allowed wine, which annoys Iris. A "dowdy" unmarried cousin of Reenie's serves the alcohol. The woman whom Iris had assumed was Richard's wife is actually his sister Winifred, who goes by "Mrs." but doesn't seem to have a husband to speak of. Because of the Depression, far fewer people have been commissioning Callie's sculptures, and so she has resorted to making bas-reliefs for the outside of insurance companies and banks. She doesn't like working for such "blatant capitalists," but she at least appreciates the public-facing nature of the work they commission.

*It is significant—and perhaps not surprising—that Iris and Laura are drawn to Alex, who represents the opposite of their own background. Befriending Alex is a way for them to enact their own youthful rebellion and learn about a worldview completely different from the one which they've grown up. Of course, while Alex and Norval are oppositional in many ways, Alex's true foil is Richard.*



*Reenie's horror at Alex being an orphan may be surprising to the reader. After all, it is hardly Alex's fault that he was born an orphan, and surely it would make more sense to be sympathetic to him due to this fact. However, Reenie finds orphans suspicious because they cannot be accurately placed within a class hierarchy, which is determined by one's family.*



*The Labour Day dinner is indeed an unlikely gathering of very different kinds of people who all happen to be connected with the Chase family in some way. Almost everyone attending has a negative opinion of at least one of the other guests—hardly the ideal circumstances for a dinner party.*



*Although Iris and Laura have only just met Alex, there is already a palpable hint of competition between the sisters over Alex's affections. The fact that Iris puts herself next to Alex suggests that she wants to get closer to him and perhaps to beat Laura for his affections. Moreover, meeting him has intensified Iris's desire to fully participate in adult life, for example by drinking wine with everyone else at the table.*



Callie's outfit looks like an attempt at signaling resistance to the dinner, whereas Alex seems to have borrowed the clothes he was wearing. Winifred compliments the house as "well preserved," but Iris knew she actually means "outmoded." The elaborate dinner Reenie cooks is clearly beyond her skill-set, but Iris feels annoyed at Winifred for not eating it. Alex makes an effort to eat, although Reenie is not flattered but rather irritated by this. When Norval asks Alex about himself, Alex explains that he left divinity school and has since "lived by [his] wits," which Winifred interprets as meaning that he's a journalist. This angers Norval, who hates reporters.

Alex then criticizes the Prime Minister's relief camps, arguing that the men there have to work 10 hours a day and hardly get anything in return, to which Richard replies: "Beggars can't be choosers." The argument is interrupted by the arrival of dessert. After, the group has coffee and watches the fireworks being set off on the Camp Grounds. Alex comments that he finds it difficult to enjoy fireworks because he believes both his parents died in the war, although he didn't know for certain. He was found in a burned-down house after a bombing in a small Western European country.

Iris is warming to Alex, though she isn't sure if she believes his story. Iris comments that it must be hard for him to not know his true identity, but he replies that he has come to believe that there is value in having a sense of self that doesn't rely on knowing his origins. Speaking from the present, Iris wonders if this moment was "the beginning," but then admits that it is hard to know when beginnings really occur.

In the present day, it is the first week of October. Iris picks flowers from her garden and then goes to the cemetery, where she finds a young woman already sitting at Laura's grave. The woman is wearing black and has long dark hair. For a second, Iris thinks it's Sabrina and she's overjoyed, but then she realizes it isn't Sabrina. She sees that the woman is crying and thinks, "Laura touches people. I do not."

Back in the 1930s, the usual a writeup about the button factory Labour Day picnic is printed in the local newspaper. It features the photograph that Elwood Murray took of Iris, Laura, and Alex, although it only names Alex as "an Out-of-Town Visitor." Reenie is horrified by the picture, which she considers immodest. Laura, however, goes to see Elwood to tell him that she wants to be a photographer when she grows up, and he agrees to let her assist him in the darkroom several times a week. He plans to teach her hand-tinting, the practice of carefully adding color to black and white images. Surprisingly, Reenie doesn't object to this arrangement; she was sure it won't be dangerous because Elwood is a "pansy."

*There is a complicated array of social dynamics at this dinner, but few are occur in an open, explicit way. Rather, people's thoughts are conveyed via subtext (or simply kept to themselves). This preserves the illusion of a polite, cohesive meal, when in fact many of the guests at the dinner distrust and dislike one another.*



*In many ways, Alex is a classic romantic hero: he is bold, rebellious, and unafraid to stand up for what he believes in. Moreover, he is mysterious. He is unlike anyone else in the novel so far, and he's also an enigma in the sense that he doesn't know anything about his background, making him the very definition of a self-invented person.*



*Considering that much of the novel deals with the burden caused by the repetition of identities and fates within a family, Alex's lack of connection to his family ends up looking somewhat ideal.*



*This passage conveys the same sense of competition between the sisters that emerged in the description of the dinner party. While it might seem bizarre that Iris still feels competitive with Laura now that she's dead, the novel suggests that sibling rivalry is powerful and long-lasting.*



*Both Iris and Laura must find sneaky, indirect ways to explore their own agency and freedom. While Laura might be genuinely interested in becoming a photographer, this interest is rather sudden and unexplained, suggesting that there may be other motivations for her sudden determination to start working in Elwood's studio.*



Laura ends up stealing some materials from Elwood's studio and hand-tinting the photographs of Chase family members hanging in **Avilion**. When Iris catches Laura doing this, she chastises her, particularly for her choice to paint the subjects' faces unrealistic colors like blue or green. Laura also steals the negative of the photograph Elwood took of her, Iris, and Alex. As soon as she does this, she immediately ceases going to the studio, which makes Elwood suspicious.

Several days a week, Laura assists at a soup kitchen which gave free meals to the men who jump on and off trains, traveling the country trying to find work. Laura begs Reenie for leftover bones from the **Avilion** kitchen, which Reenie reluctantly gives her. Reenie comments on the striking similarity between Laura and Liliana. Iris, meanwhile, is learning the button business from Norval, who teaches her how to help out with the balance sheets. At the factory, Iris feels that the other workers watch her disdainfully. One day, Elwood comes to Avilion to tell Reenie and Iris that Laura has been "seen around town" with Alex. He expressed horror that Alex, an adult man, is "taking advantage" of a 14-year-old girl.

When Reenie tells Laura about Elwood's claims, Laura nonchalantly refused to deny them. She explains that she and Alex have been talking about religion; she's been trying to reconvert him after his turn to atheism. She's unconcerned about his age or the idea that other people are talking about them. Iris feels that Laura is "making a fool of her" somehow, though she doesn't fully understand why. Reenie wants Iris to talk to Laura, but Iris feels that she can no longer get through to her sister. Iris takes to walking around town by herself. She passes the movie theater but she didn't go in because she isn't allowed; she won't enter a theater until after she's married.

In present-day October, children soon will come to Iris's house trick-or-treating, but she will turn the lights off and pretend to not be home. She buys a doughnut and coffee again, and she sits on the park bench in the sun, convinced that people are staring at her. She tries to tell herself not to care what people think, but unlike Laura, she "always did care."

*In this passage, Laura's ulterior motive is revealed: she wanted to get access to the negative of the photograph Elwood took. The fact that she went to such lengths to get it indicates that she already has strong feelings about Alex, which again portends a sense of competition between Laura and Iris for his affections. However, given that Laura is younger, it's likely that her feelings for Alex won't be reciprocated.*



*It is intriguing that Reenie seems to disapprove of Laura's efforts to help the poor and hungry considering that Reenie idolized Liliana as a saint for her work with the needy. Clearly, it is not the fact that Laura is helping the vulnerable that upsets Reenie, but rather the way she's going about it. Indeed, whereas Liliana was more meek and thus more respectable according to the social norms of the time, Laura's behavior is erratic and rebellious, which disturbs Reenie.*



*Throughout the novel, Laura's feelings about Alex remain somewhat ambiguous. She is clearly attached to him and treasures him in some way, but considering the way she talks about him in this passage, her attachment is arguably more innocent and platonic than romantic (and certainly not sexual). Of course, one could argue that this is unsurprising considering Laura is only 14. At the same time, many 14-year-olds are interested in sex, even if only in a theoretical way.*



*In many ways, the elderly Iris resembles a stereotype: a misanthropic and bitter old woman who chooses to isolate herself. Yet the novel shows that beneath this stereotypical façade, Iris is a complex and contradictory person.*



In October 1934, rumors spread about the workers at the button factory unionizing and “outside agitators” getting involved. These agitators are thought to be highly suspect, “criminal” and “foreign.” Reenie and Elwood express fears that they will unleash violence similar to that of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. In September, Norval laid off several workers and gave the rest shorter hours. The demand for buttons is down, and for quite a while, the factory has been selling its products for less money than it costs to make them. In December, Norval announces that the factory will be temporarily closing and he asks that the workers be patient. He then goes home and drinks himself into a stupor. Hearing him crash around, Laura said that she will pray for him.

A few days after Norval announces that the factory will close, the union holds a meeting, during which they vilify Norval and his greed, “his big house and fancy daughters.” Norval stops coming to eat in the dining room. Callie comes to see him, saying that she’s horrified by how he’s treating his workers. A vicious argument ensues, which leads to them breaking up. The next week, a general strike takes place in solidarity with the button factory workers. Laura expresses concern about Alex, who she knows is “mixed up in it somehow.” Meanwhile, Richard comes to **Avilion** and meets with Norval in his study. The next day, a riot begins at a rally outside the Port Ticonderoga town hall. The rioters burn effigies of Norval, Iris, and Laura.

The rioters set fire to the factory and smash the windows of businesses that refused to join the strike. They break into the offices of the local newspaper, beat up Elwood, and break the machines. Iris feels scared but also excited. At dinner that night, Laura refuses to eat. The next day, the military arrives to subdue the rioters, followed by the Mounted Police. The police come to **Avilion** and ask to speak with Iris and Laura about Alex. They ask Laura if she knows that he’s a “known subversive and radical” who has been “stirring up trouble” in the relief camps. When Laura claims ignorance of Alex’s subversive activities, they put increasing pressure on her, but Laura maintains that she wouldn’t tell them even if she knew something.

*While the Bolshevik Revolution certainly was violent, the way it is invoked by the characters in the novel is not usually from an informed perspective, but rather one that views Bolshevism as a mysterious, terrifying bogeyman. Of course, there is a certain irony to the way in which the characters in the novel vilify communism in a moment in which the very worst sides of capitalism were most apparent.*



*Norval’s choices in this part of the novel are mysterious, making it difficult to adjudicate the extent to which he is blameworthy for everything that happens during and after the riots. He evidently didn’t want the factory to close, although it is not clear if this was out of a sense of concern for his workers, to save his own reputation, or both. The fact that he is willing to meet with Richard, however, does arguably indicate a level of indisputable culpability in all that goes wrong after this point.*



*In this passage, Laura leverages her power in order to deflect the police’s attention away from Alex. Her power is somewhat perverse because it emerges from her perceived powerlessness: she is a young, wealthy, “innocent” girl, and for this reason the police underestimate her. Although they are a little suspicious, it seems they consider it implausible that Laura would actually be mixed up in radical activities.*



As soon as the police leaves, Iris tells Laura that she knows Laura is hiding Alex in the house, and Laura admitted that he's in the cellar. Iris cries out in exasperation, but they both laugh at the idea of Reenie finding him by accident. Iris suggests they hide him in the attic. After waiting until Reenie goes to bed, Iris creeps down to the cellar and finds Alex, telling him, "You should be ashamed of yourself." They speak flirtatiously: Alex hints at the scandal that would ensue if people thought he and Laura were having an affair, but he assures Iris that Laura is too young for him. He explains that Laura is hiding him out of a sense of Christian duty to care for the vulnerable. Iris asks Alex if he started the fire, and he insists that he didn't.

Iris and Laura discuss the plan for how they will keep Alex alive without revealing to anyone else that he's in the attic. They never discuss what they'll do if someone *does* find out. They smuggle their leftovers for him, being careful to avoid even bringing him a plate, because Reenie would have noticed it was missing. Presently, Iris reflects that Reenie probably was suspicious, yet perhaps tried to preserve her own ignorance so that he could honestly tell the authorities she didn't know anything if they were caught. Alex asks for cigarettes, and they bring some for him, asking him to limit himself to one a day, which he doesn't do.

Iris and Laura also bring Alex water to wash with, and they then dump it out in secret. While Iris is waiting for him to finish washing, she finds the idea of him naked on the other side of the door inexplicably "painful." The newspapers accuse Alex of being "an arsonist and a murderer" whose education has led him to become an extremist and commit evil acts. Wanted posters featuring the picture of Alex that Elwood took are hung up around town. Meanwhile, Alex asks the girls to bring him writing materials. Taking care of Alex brings the sisters closer together. In the evenings, they talk to Alex; after they leave him, Iris thinks about him while she's going to sleep.

One day, Iris goes up to the attic without Laura for the first time. She finds Alex smoking, and when he notices she's there, he jumps and drops his cigarette. They both kneel down to try and put out the sparks, and in one swift moment, Alex kissed Iris. Iris isn't sure if she was expecting this or how she felt about it at the time. Alex tries to take her clothes off, but she pushes him off her and runs away, feeling that he's laughing at her behind her back. Iris knows that if it were to happen again, she would be in trouble. She tells Laura that they needed to find a way to sneak Alex out of Port Ticonderoga.

*While Laura takes everything to do with hiding Alex seriously, Alex himself has a more playful, mischievous attitude toward the situation. Indeed, there is a clear sense in which he enjoys being hidden by the girls, as evidenced both by his joking about having an affair with Laura and his flirtatious exchange with Iris. It apparently doesn't bother Alex that his attention is divided between the two sisters—in fact, he seems to enjoy it.*



*Taking care of Alex serves as a strange kind of coming-of-age ritual for the girls. Having been taken care of (and at times pampered) their whole lives, they now have the responsibility of keeping another human being alive. Furthermore, it is significant that this person is a young man in whom they both seem to have some level of romantic interest.*



*It is poignant that caring for Alex initially has the effect of bringing Iris and Laura closer together, because later in the novel, his presence in their lives has the opposite effect. Furthermore, it is obvious why this is a thrilling and exciting time for the girls. Secretly harboring an attractive young fugitive who's featured in wanted posters all around town is precisely the kind of adventurous, rebellious, romantic mission they dreamed of.*



*Iris's report of this scene is notable for its complete lack of detail regarding how she felt about it. Beyond surprise, Iris does not articulate her reaction to Alex suddenly kissing her. Because female sexuality was so harshly policed at the time, it is reasonable to conclude that this unwillingness to narrate her own feelings corresponds to the shame Iris has been taught to feel about her own desire.*



Alex, meanwhile, complains about developing cabin fever. By the time the new year comes, Iris and Laura decide that the time was right for him to escape. They steal one of Norval's old coats, make Alex a packed lunch, and hug him goodbye. After he leaves, the girls both cry. In the attic, they find a notebook in which he'd written a long list of strange-sounding words, such as "quartzephyr," "jocynth," and "zycron." The girls are suspicious of the list, and Laura says she'll burn it in the fire.

A week later, Laura gives Iris a print she made of the photograph Elwood took of them and Alex. Laura had cut it so that only Iris's hand is visible, and she tells Iris that she knows this is how Iris will want to remember it. Laura admits that she made a corresponding version for herself with Iris cut out. Iris reflects that "This was the closest [Laura] ever came, in my hearing, to a confession of love for Alex Thomas." After that day, the sisters don't speak of Alex again.

In the present day, Iris dreams that she is covered in thick hair. She thinks that she wakes up but she actually doesn't, and she dreams that Richard is there. When Iris actually does wake up, her heart is beating fast and she thinks about how nightmares can kill people. She returns to the story she's been telling. In early 1935, Laura is spending more and more time helping the church's relief efforts, and Iris rarely sees her. The company that insured the button factory refuses to pay for it to be rebuilt after the fire, which means that it remained closed. Norval spends increasing amounts of time in Toronto, sometimes bringing Iris with him.

Norval is doing business with Richard Griffen. Reluctantly, he's looking for people to buy the factory, but no one wants it. By this point, Norval is thin and his hands are always shaking. Laura has also stopped eating, seemingly because she doesn't believe she deserves food while others are going hungry. During their trips to Toronto, Iris and Norval often have dinner with Richard. Iris is silent while the men discussed politics; Richard expresses his hatred of communism and his approval of Hitler's economic policies. Iris is usually bored during these conversations and she only nods absently.

*Although there is no explicit explanation of the strange words Alex writes down, the fact that one of the words is "zycron" should alert the reader to the connection between Alex and the man depicted in The Blind Assassin. This, in turn, indicates that the list of words are names for places or alien species Alex is trying out for his science-fiction writing.*



*The two versions of the photographs—each with one of the girls cut out—are highly significant. They represent how two people can have interlocking yet ultimately separate and even conflicting accounts of a given event. To each of the girls, Alex means the same thing yet also something totally different.*



*While harboring Alex brought the sisters closer together, in this part of the novel they drift apart. Likely as a way of coping with her grief (as well as indulging her unending desire to help others), Laura retreats into the relief effort. Although this is obviously altruistic, in a way it is also self-indulgent—Laura is able to escape the responsibilities placed on Iris, which Iris is certainly not enthused about having to live up to.*



*There is a fascinating contrast here between Laura's saint-like asceticism and the self-harm of Norval's alcoholism versus Richard's unruffled confidence and approval of far-right politics. Norval and Laura's behavior seems to be a confused and guilt-ridden way of reacting to the Depression. Richard, meanwhile, breezes ahead despite being surrounded by terrible suffering.*



One day, Iris, Norval, and Richard are supposed to have lunch together at the Royal York Hotel. Just before they're about to go inside, though, Norval pauses and tells Iris that she and Richard will be dining alone and that Richard is going to propose to her. When Iris asks her father what she should do, he replies that the choice is hers, but that "a certain amount depends on it." He explains that if Iris marries Richard, Laura's future will be secure and it might be possible to save the button business. Iris says nothing, which Norval interprets as agreement. Richard arrives and takes Iris away on her own. She doesn't have strong feelings about him, either positive or negative. Yet that night, she's consumed by dread.

A week after Iris and Richard get engaged, Iris is invited to lunch with Winifred at the Arcadian Court, a restaurant on top of Simpsons department store. Iris wears her "best daytime outfit" but still doesn't fit in with her fancy surroundings. Winifred is wearing green. She tells Iris to call her Freddie, adding, "I want us to be great chums." She looks at Iris's ring, explaining that she helped Richard choose it. Winifred is about 30, older than Iris but seven years younger than Richard. She explains that she and Richard are "such great pals" and that she organizes his social calendar for him. In hindsight, Iris knows Winifred must have been disappointed in how she behaved during this lunch.

Winifred indicates that she wants to shape Iris into a new kind of person. She mentions Adelia and how the Montfort women were known for their wonderful style. Winifred insists that with the right adjustments, Iris "could be charming," but Iris feels that this is untrue. Once they finish lunch, Winifred begins describing all the tasks and events that will be part of planning the wedding. In hindsight, Iris feels that Winifred was a "pimp." The wedding is to take place in Rosedale, the "fake-Tudor barn" where Winifred lives. Winifred brings Iris clothes and coaches her in how to behave around society people. Iris confesses that, although she hates Winifred, these lessons did prove to be helpful.

The night before the wedding, Laura creeps into the bedroom in Rosedale where Iris is supposed to be preparing herself for the big day. Laura tells Iris that Iris is too young to get married and that she doesn't believe Iris actually wants to do it. Iris replies that the decision is a practical one and explains that it's necessary in order to protect their father. Laura remains adamant that Iris shouldn't marry and warns her, "But you'll have to let him touch you." After Laura leaves, Iris stares at her trousseau, which frightens her, although she tries to remember that it signals nothing more than traveling to a new place.

*Sadly, this kind of pressure and coercion was not unusual at the time. Indeed, while it might not have been articulated so obviously, most women Iris's age (and particularly the oldest sister in a family) would have known that their choice of husband would dramatically impact the family's fortunes and they would have to act accordingly. Iris's situation may be sad, but it is certainly not unusual.*



*Significantly, Winifred's way of speaking is unprecedented thus far in the book. Her clipped and cheerful manner is seemingly a product of the privileged, superficial life she's been leading. Furthermore, it is a way of speaking that tends to conceal her true feelings. What Winifred is saying here and what she actually means are two different things, as Iris indicates that Winifred actually disapproved of her despite her polite airs.*



*Iris's use of the word "pimp" shatters the image of genteel elegance and propriety conveyed by Winifred in this passage. Indeed, perhaps part of the reason that Winifred is so devoted to the shallow, superficial aspects of life is that the truth of who she is so abhorrent.*



*Laura's decision to beg Iris not to marry Richard could be interpreted in two different ways. On one hand, perhaps Laura is admirable for attempting to protect her sister from what she perceived would be a terrible marriage. At the same time, there is arguably something childishly selfish about urging Iris to back out of something that Iris was essentially obligated to do.*



In Iris's wedding picture, she smiles without her teeth. She feels completely dissociated from the version of herself displayed in this photograph. Richard, meanwhile, is still somewhat young and handsome. Laura somehow spoils each one of the group photographs by either frowning, biting her nails, or moving in each one. Norval is exceedingly drunk on the wedding day and at a certain point disappears altogether. After the wedding, Richard takes Iris away to a room at the Royal York Hotel—the same location where the wedding reception took place—where they have sex for the first time, an experience Iris finds unsettling and painful.

*Although one's wedding day is supposed to be a happy occasion, the reality for many women like Iris in arranged marriages was that it was instead defined by fear, unease, and disappointment. Iris has so little agency over her own life at this point that her wants and needs seemingly no longer matter at all.*



The next day, the newlyweds take a train to New York, where they have dinner with a number of Richard's wealthy friends. These people act "fearful" and "deferential" around Richard. In hindsight, Iris realizes that Richard was probably trying to avoid spending time alone with her. His friends comment on how young Iris is. A couple of days later, Iris and Richard take a ship across the Atlantic Ocean, a journey that makes Iris terribly seasick. She's relieved that her illness gives them an excuse not to have sex. Under pressure from Richard, Iris forces herself to leave their cabin, attending a cabaret performance. On the third day at sea, Iris goes onto the deck alone; she looks out at the ocean and throws a penny into it, but she refrains from making a wish.

*During this era, both the law and cultural norms essentially refuted the idea that a woman could be raped by her own husband. Even if a woman didn't want to have sex, it was seen as part of her duty as a wife to comply if a man wanted to. As a result, Iris is constantly looking for external excuses not to have sex with Richard (such as her seasickness) because simply telling him that she didn't want to would not be concerned a valid objection.*



## CHAPTER 6

In **The Blind Assassin**, the man opens the door to yet another apartment he is borrowing. For once, he has the luxury of a place to himself for four days. As the man waits for the woman to come join him, he fantasizes about running away to Mexico. He's been working on a new idea for a science-fiction story about a group of aliens made up of "crystals in a high state of organization" who traveled to Earth and mistakenly assumed that Earthlings were like themselves. As a result, they thought that window panes and eyeglasses were the planet's inhabitants. The man stops himself, realizing that this is only an *idea*, not a story. He's tired of writing the cheap, titillating narratives that earn him money.

*This fragment of an idea for a science-fiction story is arguably the most interesting piece of narrative that the man comes up with across the course of the novel. It speaks to the way in which living beings cannot help but understand the world around them as a kind of projection of themselves. For this reason, people gravitate toward what is familiar and project their own feelings onto their surroundings, including onto other people.*



The man has run out of money and he hopes that the woman will bring him some. He also hopes she brings cigarettes. The man paces around the apartment and remembers an old lover who lived in the same building, a nurse who used to make him lavish breakfasts. After they broke up, the nurse married a lawyer, which pleased the man in a strange way, showing that "The sluts win sometimes." He looks out the window and finally sees the woman walking over. When she arrives, she tells the man that she's brought him a check, cigarettes, and a fifth of high-quality scotch that she stole from her bar at home. They embrace.

*The harsh and derogatory way in which the man thinks about women could be interpreted as a sign of his latent misogyny, which the woman chooses to overlook out of love for him. Of course, having such attitudes was very common during this era, and it would have been rare to find a man who hadn't absorbed sexist ways of thinking to some degree.*



The woman has a bath; when she gets out, the man wraps her in a pink towel, which pleases her. Every time the woman is in one of these borrowed apartments she feels like she's trespassing, yet she also wants to look through the cupboards and drawers. She's searched the man's belongings before, finding a driver's license and birth certificate with two different names, neither of which are his real one. The man sings along to the radio. The woman asks him to keep telling her the story, calling it "my story."

In the man's story, the blind assassin enters the chamber of the girl who is supposed to be sacrificed. Instead of attacking her, though, he gently takes her hand, having decided to have sex with her before he kills her. He asks if he can touch her, explaining that he's blind, and she nods. Brought together by the most unlikely circumstances, they end up falling in love. The woman interrupts to say she is surprised to hear the man speaking of love, a concept he has dismissed in the past. The man says he is just representing truth: throughout history, people have fallen in love. He adds that the blind assassin is acting selfishly and may still kill the girl, and the woman accuses him of "backing down." The man laughs and says that X has nothing to lose, a little like the man himself.

A *Toronto Star* article from August 28, 1935 announces that the hunt for the missing 15-year-old "society schoolgirl" Laura Chase has been called off after she was found safe. Richard gives a quote to the newspaper in which he shares his and Iris's relief. He explains that the whole matter was only a miscommunication about Laura's holiday plans, and he denies the rumors that Laura ran away from home.

In **The Blind Assassin**, the woman walks through the city, trying to blend in with her surroundings despite the fancy clothes she's wearing. She knows that if she's caught by the authorities, she will "renounce" the man immediately. She knows that she would escape without getting into serious trouble. Recently, the woman has had the sense that she's being watched, and the fear she feels makes it all the more exciting and enjoyable to be with the man. Many aspects of his daily life are a mystery to her, and she knows that such mysteries are crucial to romance. The man has stopped smoking pre-rolled cigarettes as he can no longer afford them, although sometimes the woman brings him some that she steals from the cigarette box at home.

*This passage raises the question of whether it is possible that the man and woman truly love each other considering that, at least on some level, they don't really know each other. The woman seems to totally trust and devote herself to the man, yet the two forms of ID he carries with different names suggests that he may not be who she thinks he is.*



*This passage reiterates the idea that despite the man's best efforts to the contrary, he cannot help but fall into romantic ways of thinking. He tries to diminish the extent to which the story has turned into a narrative of love against the odds, but it is clear that—likely due to his own situation with the woman—this is the narrative he's telling.*



*Once again, events that haven't yet occurred in the main narrative are foreshadowed in a newspaper article, which gives only a glimpse (and perhaps a highly misleading one) into the event being described. The fact that Richard, rather than Norval, is the one commenting on Laura's disappearance suggests that Laura is now living with Richard and Iris.*



*This passage illustrates how the stakes of hiding out are very different for the man and the woman. The woman finds the fact that she is being watched thrilling, even if it would also be disastrous for her if anyone found out about her affair with the man. By contrast, if the authorities were to capture the man, he may well be imprisoned, deported, or killed.*



The woman walks past the apartment building where the man is staying, then back again. When she arrives, a voice in her head taunts her with the idea that the man won't be there and that she'll "never see him again."

*This taunting voice and the anxiety it provokes is a familiar part of the experience of being in love, although in this case there are added elements of uncertainty given the man's risky situation.*



The man lets the woman into the apartment, kissing her immediately. He explains that he had to leave the last place he was staying in a rush and that he is now living in the janitor's room, pretending to the landlord that he is the janitor. The room barely even has a bed, and there is no lock on the door. Later, while the man and the woman are lying underneath a moldy blanket, the woman tells the man that he's gotten too thin. He teases her that she isn't reliable enough for him to depend on her for food. However, he then agrees to resume the story, noting that when they left off, the blind assassin was deciding "whether to cut [the girl's] throat or love her forever."

*The fact that the woman keeps coming to the different places in the man is staying, no matter how dingy or decrepit, indicates the depth of her love for him. Yet the note on which this passage ends suggests that the man's love may not be as pure and devoted as the woman's. As the reader has seen, his feelings for her are tinged with resentment, hatred, and potentially even violence.*



While the blind assassin is lying holding the girl, he hears the Lord of the Underworld arrive. The blind assassin hides the girl behind the door and lies the sentry's dead body on the bed, hoping that the Lord of the Underworld might not (initially) notice the difference. When the Lord enters, the blind assassin manages to sneak out, taking the girl with him. They escape the temple into the outside air. Two of Zycron's five moons are already out, with more coming, and thus they won't be able to hide in the cover of darkness. The blind assassin considers abandoning or killing the girl in order to protect himself, but almost immediately decides against this.

*The fact that the blind assassin repeatedly considers harming or killing the girl, while ultimately deciding not to do, so could be considered either romantic or sinister. Indeed, some would argue that the idealization of the thin line between love and violence is part of why abusive dynamics are often perceived as romantic, rather than dangerous and morally wrong.*



The blind assassin and the girl need to get out of **Sakiel-Norn**. One possible path of escape is the canal that runs through the city. The girl cannot swim, but they manage to float together, with her clinging onto the blind assassin. As soon as they have traveled far enough away from the city, the blind assassin pulls them up onto the bank. After checking that no one is around, they embrace and have sex. Later, three spies sent by the People of Desolation find the boy and girl lying naked together. They are fascinated by the fact that the boy is blind and the girl is mute, and they choose to believe that these two are divine messengers. The blind assassin takes advantage of this, deciding to try and play the role of the messenger and speaking in riddles.

*In this passage, it becomes even more clear that the blind assassin could be seen as a representation of the man, while the girl is the woman. Like the man, the blind assassin is a persecuted worker and rebel who uses the power of storytelling to survive. The fact that the man is clearly a representation of Alex (and the woman is presumably a representation of Laura) heightens the dizzying mirror effect of these multiple embedded narratives.*



The blind assassin is also concerned about how to protect the girl. He decides that he will pretend they are two different kinds of divine messengers and that she interprets the messages he receives using hand gestures. At this point, the man stops telling the story, noting that he is troubled by his untrustworthy friends.

*While storytelling might provide an escape from the grim and frightening reality of the man's life, there are limits to how distracting it can be.*



A 1936 *Mayfair* gossip article recounts the annual charity costume ball at the Royal York Hotel. The theme this year was “Xanadu” and the party was filled with “harems, servants, dancing girls and slaves, as well as damsels with dulcimers, merchants, courtesans, fakirs, soldiers of all nations, and beggars galore.” The ball was organized by Winifred, and Iris served on the committee.

In **The Blind Assassin**, the man is now renting a dingy room above a hardware store. Yet for all the dreary, barely-functional nature of the room, it is still paradise “compared to where he might be.” He hasn’t informed his friends about his current location, instead choosing to disappear without warning. He believes they were planning to sacrifice him as a scapegoat and “martyr” for the cause. He waits for the woman to arrive. Last time he saw her, he noticed a bruise on her thigh. When he asked about it, she said she “bumped into a door,” which was obviously a lie. While the man waits, he concocts a story about a group of explorers who discover an alien spaceship frozen inside ice.

The man hasn’t given the characters names yet, so he calls them X, Y, Z, and B. B, the only woman among the explorers, is Russian and believes in “Free Love.” Once the explorers have melted the ice enough, they find a being inside: it has a “humanoid shape,” is “obviously male,” and is unconscious or possibly dead. The explorers decide to put the alien inside B’s tent, forcing her to sleep in another tent, and they all take turns keeping guard that night. During B’s shift, she is overcome by romantic curiosity and lust, and she decides to get into the tent with the alien, where she falls asleep.

With B beside him, the alien starts to glow and the ice surrounding him melts. He gets up, and the green hair on his head—which now reveals itself to be tentacles—wraps around B’s throat. B wakes up in horror, but before long willingly succumbs to this “embrace,” letting the alien bite her and turn her into one of his own kind. The man pauses, rolling a cigarette and pondering where the story will go next. There are many options, but whatever happens, “Clothes will be torn off in the process.”

The man thinks about why he writes trashy stories like this, aware that it is both because he needs the money and because he is especially skilled at it. He once dreamed of writing more profound, noble literature, but he tells himself that it doesn’t appeal to “the average working man.” He looks at his watch and concludes that the woman is not coming.

*This description of the fictional place Xanadu (taken from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem Kubla Kahn) in many ways resembles Sakiel-Norn, which again emphasizes the sense of twinned narratives within Atwood’s novel.*



*Although it still hasn’t been made explicitly clear what the woman’s domestic situation is, it is fairly obvious that she is married, and in this passage it emerges that her husband likely beats her. Again, this was sadly common in the early 20th century (when The Blind Assassin takes place), and women had few rights to appeal to in order to stop such abuse taking place.*



*This story is almost comically salacious and vulgar, yet is actually representative of some of the kinds of short stories published in science-fiction magazines at the time. The idea that the man would be able to earn money through publishing this kind of material is quite plausible, and it again reflects the unfortunate portrayal of women as inferior to men.*



*The man’s comment at the end of this passage indicates that he has a rather disdainful attitude toward his own writing—an understandable cynicism given the formulaic and silly nature of the stories that he knows will sell.*



*Here, the man seems to justify the crude and silly nature of the stories he writes by claiming that they are working-class literature, whereas more sophisticated literature is bourgeois. Of course, this is rather patronizing to the working class.*



## CHAPTER 7

Iris states that it is only possible to write the truth if one pretends that no one else will ever read it. Yesterday, she received a copy of the new edition of **The Blind Assassin**. Laura has been dead long enough that the book is now in the public domain, which means that anyone has the right to publish it. The publisher who released the latest edition is called Artemesia Press, which Iris speculates is “probably run by a bunch of women.” The cover describes Laura as a “modernist” and *The Blind Assassin* as one of the “Neglected masterpieces of the twentieth century.” Iris decides to call her lawyer, who is not the same man who “battled Winifred heroically,” but rather a new person named Mr. Sykes.

Mr. Sykes’s receptionist tells Iris that Sykes is in a meeting. Iris explains that she needs to write her will and that she’s planning to come to Toronto soon. She predicts that Mr. Sykes will receive this news with dread or disbelief that she has anything valuable to leave behind. Iris has a trunk that was originally part of her trousseau filled with old notebooks, the typescript of **The Blind Assassin**, corrected proofs, letters to the publisher, and hate mail. There are also five copies of the first edition of the novel. Iris gave another copy to Richard, which was found on the boat with him when he killed himself. Winifred interpreted this as evidence that Iris was responsible for Richard’s death.

Iris knows that if she doesn’t sort out the trunk now, Myra will deal with it after her death. She predicts that Myra will set fire to its contents in order to preserve Iris’s privacy. This is also what Reenie would have done. Scholars used to frequently write to Iris asking for access to Laura’s archive, and Iris would write cold replies refusing their requests. In the letters, she would viciously demand that the writers respect the fact that Laura was a human being and Iris’s sister, not just subject matter for academic scholarship.

Iris wonders if she should leave her trunk to Sabrina, but she doesn’t believe Sabrina would accept this “gift.” She thinks about why Sabrina is still refusing to speak to her, telling herself that she can hardly be blamed for Aimee’s death. Sabrina is probably engaged in the Sisyphean task of feeding the hungry in India; Iris reflects on the similarities between Sabrina and Laura.

*The notion that a women’s press would be the one to publish new editions of The Blind Assassin is highly plausible. Due to the way in which women were systematically excluded from becoming writers and had their work devalued if they did, one of the projects of feminist publishing and literary scholarship has been to recuperate writers like “Laura” who remained in obscurity due to sexism. Interestingly, however, Iris seems skeptical and even resentful of such projects.*



*This is the first time that any real details are provided about Richard’s death, which is only here confirmed to be a suicide. In the newspaper article at the beginning of the novel, it is simply described as a mysterious death that happened in a boat after Richard had been missing for a while. It seems that there is an extent to which Iris taunted Richard, even if it may not be true that—as Winifred argues—she caused his death.*



*Iris seems to resent both Reenie and Myra’s tactic of burning old documents and the efforts of the feminist scholars to recuperate and save Laura’s archive. Indeed, these conflicting feelings betray the inner turmoil Iris feels over the question of whether it’s better to remember or forget the past.*



*Although the reader doesn’t have much information about Iris’s relationship with Sabrina and Aimee yet, it does seem as if she may be trying to reassure herself in this passage more than face the full truth.*



The weather is warm. Walter drives Iris to see Mr. Sykes in Toronto. Myra packed them a picnic and rug for the journey, as if they were going on an “ocean voyage” rather than a fairly short drive. When they reach the open expanse of the countryside, it starts to rain, and Iris falls asleep. She feels self-conscious when she wakes up, worried that she snored. They get lost in Toronto; Iris goes to the city so infrequently that each time she is there, it has changed so much that she feels disorientated. Mr. Sykes’s office is on the 50th floor of a fancy glass high-rise building. After Iris finishes her meeting, Walter insists they go get some lunch, likely on Myra’s urging.

Walter suggests that they eat at a place called The Fire Pit. It is near Sabrina’s old school, and Iris used to spend time there while “keeping an eye on Sabrina” following her first runaway attempt. Once, Sabrina and her friends came to sit in a booth while Iris sat nearby, watching while keeping herself out of Sabrina’s sight. She noticed that Sabrina wasn’t really listening to her friends—just pretending to. It’s possible that Sabrina noticed Iris but didn’t know who she was. Now, it takes Iris and Walter a long time to find the Fire Pit, and when they eventually do, they see that it has closed. They go to a greasy spoon in Davenport instead, and Walter pays, which leads Iris to believe that Myra must have given him money.

Iris asks Walter to drive them past the old house she shared with Richard on the way home. She remembers sitting by the fire with Richard at six p.m. every evening, drinking martinis while he “sum[med] up the day.” He resented Iris for not being able to truly understand him. Standing outside the old house, Iris expects to feel something, but no emotions come. Strangely, she notices a pair of stuffed pantyhose hanging on a tree. They have obviously been thrown out of the window of Iris’s former bedroom. She remembers looking out that window and thinking about “How lost to myself I ha[d] become.”

Myra tells Iris that a developer is hoping to tear down the Jubilee Bridge and build condos on the land where it currently stands. Now, Iris stands on the bridge and thinks back to her honeymoon, 64 years ago. Iris remembers feeling incredibly anxious during this time. She was crushed by disappointment in her marriage and worried that Richard felt the same. After the ship they’re on arrives at Southampton, they catch a train to London and check into Brown’s Hotel. Iris wears the negligee that Winifred selected for her. She and Richard don’t speak much and during the day as Richard is busy, presumably conducting business meetings. Iris goes sightseeing alone, and in the evenings she reports back to Richard what she had seen.

*It is striking that, in her old age, Iris considers herself to be completely alone, when in fact she has two people—Myra and Walter—who are totally devoted to taking care of her. Iris’s ability to overlook this care is arguably a product of her class position. Having been raised her whole life with the expectation that working-class people would care for her, she doesn’t perceive Walter and Myra’s kindness and care as antidotes to her isolation.*



*One of the novel’s main themes is the way in which familial relationships—not just romantic ones—can also constitute a form of doomed love. The way Iris would secretly follow Sabrina around and watch her from afar certainly recalls the behavior of a jilted lover consumed by longing. Indeed, the estrangement between Sabrina and Iris is shown to be almost more painful than that between two lovers.*



*Unlike Laura, Iris is not a woman of extreme, expressive displays of emotion. Her internal life is more often characterized by a kind of flatness and detachment. Her feelings about Richard (at least at this stage in her memory) are not viciously negative and resentful. Rather, she appears to not feel anything about him at all. Indeed, this could be interpreted as a sign of emotional repression.*



*While Iris may not have been personally enthusiastic about marrying Richard and making him happy, she did feel pressure to live up to the duties expected of her as a wife. As such, she made an effort to please Richard and was terrified of the idea that he might not enjoy being with her. Particularly in her early marriage, perhaps she feared that if she did not satisfy Richard, he wouldn’t uphold his promise of saving the button factory and taking care of Laura.*



Richard encourages Iris to shop, which she does reluctantly. She spends a lot of time just wandering around. She knows that she's supposed to be growing closer to Richard during the honeymoon, but in reality he feels like more and more of a stranger to her with each passing day. They go to Paris and stay at the Lucretia Hotel, which will later become a Nazi headquarters during World War II. In the hotel café, a waiter tries to cheer Iris up, but the next day he hits on her. She and Richard then go to Rome; by this point, Iris is becoming more comfortable and confident about traveling. She writes postcards to Laura, Reenie, and Norval.

The honeymoon ends with a week in Berlin, where Richard also has business—his company makes shovel handles, which he's exporting to Germany. Iris enjoys being there. When she returns to Toronto, she finds it “squat and cramped.” While the newlyweds were gone, Winifred busied herself decorating their house. Iris knows that Reenie would scoff at the “new money” style Winifred favors. When Iris mentions that she had no idea about the redecorating, Richard says they'd wanted it to be a surprise for her. Just after they arrive, Laura calls the house, sobbing. She asked why Iris hadn't come back earlier, explaining that Norval is dead. Shocked, Iris says that she'd never received any of the phone calls or telegrams containing this news while she was away.

Iris then realizes that Richard dealt with all the telegrams they received while they were away and that he must have concealed the news of Norval's death from her. She feels like she might be sick, but she makes an effort to stay calm. She goes downstairs and tells Richard that she's heard the news. He apologizes for keeping from her, saying that he didn't want to worry her before adding, “I wanted you all to myself.” Iris feels lightheaded, barely able to understand the words Richard is saying.

In the present day, Iris tries not to take any notice of Christmas, though Myra makes it hard to ignore. On New Year's Eve, it begins to snow heavily, and Myra calls to check if Iris is alright. She promises that Walter will shortly come by to shovel Iris's driveway. The following day, Iris goes out for a walk, but not long after she leaves her house she falls and finds herself unable to get up. Just as she wonders if she is going to get hypothermia, two men she doesn't know appear and help her up. They take her inside, and before long Myra arrives, immediately making tea and a hot water bottle. Iris feels furious with her body for letting her down like this. Inside her own mind, she is still her young, fully capable self.

*Iris's experience of wandering around various cities and being cheered up by a waiter who then tried to hit on her emphasizes the profound isolation she felt as a young, newly married woman with no particular connection to her husband. Indeed, this status isolates her perhaps more than any other position. She cannot really socialize in the way she would if she were single, yet she is also lonely within her marriage.*



*Both Winifred's redecoration of the house and the much more serious issue of Norval's death serve as brutal reminders of Iris's total lack of agency over her own life. Everything is controlled and decided for her, to the point that Richard even prevents other people from communicating with her. In today's world, this would likely be interpreted as a classic sign of an abusive relationship. Unfortunately, at this time (the early 20th century), it was commonly expected that husbands would control their wives in this manner.*



*Richard's utter selfishness and total lack of consideration for Iris's feelings make him the villain of the novel. At the same time, he is not a uniquely evil individual, but rather someone who represents the kinds of cruelty commonly enacted by men of his class position.*



*Iris seems to treat the prospect of her own death with the same detached attitude with which she approached many other parts of her life. Indeed, she is less afraid of dying than she is horrified by her own powerlessness, particularly given the mismatch between her physical and mental states of being.*



Back in 1935, when Iris goes to **Avilion** after hearing of Norval's death, Laura stands outside waiting for her, looking "very fragile and alone." Richard drives Iris there in his new blue coupé while Iris sits with an eggshell hat in her lap. On seeing Iris, Laura grabs onto her and holds her "as if she were drowning." Iris's hat falls on the ground and Laura accidentally steps on it, but Iris doesn't care. While Reenie presumably distracts Richard, Iris and Laura go upstairs to be alone. Laura explained that when Norval died, he had locked himself in the turret of the house. He stopped eating and drinking, and eventually Reenie's boyfriend, Ron Hincks, kicked down the door to find him dead.

Iris did not even know that Reenie and Ron were dating. Laura explains that they found many empty bottles in the turret, to which Iris replies, "He drank himself to death." Laura explains that it all happened after it was announced that Chase and Sons was merging with Richard's company and that everyone who worked at the button factory was being fired. Iris realizes that she'd "married Richard for nothing." She asks if Norval left a note, and Laura replies that Reenie found nothing—though Iris knows that if Reenie *had* found a note, she would have destroyed it without telling anyone.

Iris believes that Norval would have left a suicide note. He had a life insurance trust that could only be accessed by Laura after she turned 21. This indicates that Norval had lost trust in Richard; any money Iris had would, at the time, have automatically belonged to her husband. Iris inherits Norval's military medals. Reenie tells Iris that everyone in Port Ticonderoga came to Norval's funeral and that everyone felt great sympathy for Laura. Being only 15, there is no question that Laura will have to leave **Avilion** and come to live with Iris and Richard. Laura suggests that Reenie come to Toronto with them, but Richard says that he and Winifred have already hired all the staff they needed in Toronto.

Richard arranges that Reenie and Ron will act as "custodian[s]" of **Avilion**, fixing up the house and taking care of it so that he, Iris, and Laura can come back there during summers. Richard and Winifred also arrange for Laura to attend "a proper school," an institution called St. Cecilia's. Laura tells Iris that she believes Richard felt that she's an unwelcome addition to the life he was supposed to be leading with Iris. By this point, Reenie is pregnant with Myra, and it's partly because of this that she hands Iris and Laura over to Richard.

*While the narrative has largely focused on the feelings of isolation Iris experienced after her marriage, this passage serves as a reminder that Laura is isolated in an entirely different way. Both girls are orphaned, but while Iris's life has moved onto its next stage (albeit a rather bleak one), Laura remains stuck in their now almost completely empty childhood home, as if she's been relegated to the past and forgotten.*



*The terrible realization that Richard has not fulfilled his promise to save Chase and Sons presents a major turning point in the novel. Before, Iris's suffering in her marriage at least seemed justified by pragmatism; now, however, it is totally pointless. Indeed, this is one of the novel's main (incredibly bleak) messages: life is filled with suffering, and most of the time, this suffering is totally meaningless.*



*One of the most traumatizing aspects of the experience of marriage during this time was that it often involved being totally cut off from one's past life. It was as if, when a woman got married, she was expected to become an entirely new person with no connection to her previous self. Now that Iris and Laura have been orphaned, Laura has to endure a similar process without even having the benefits that come with marriage.*



*On the surface, it seems as if Richard is making an effort to take care of Laura out of a sense of familial duty. However, the actions that he and Winifred are actually taking—refusing to let Reenie come to Toronto, enrolling Laura in a fancy, austere private school—show that they do not really have her best interests at heart.*



Richard claims to be “besotted” with Iris, a sentiment that confused her. Winifred, meanwhile, is occupied with finalizing the redecoration of the house and designing the garden. Iris waits impatiently for the arrival of Laura, who keeps delaying her journey for different reasons. The two servants at the house are a husband and wife who look like siblings named Mr. and Mrs. Murgatroyd. Iris tries to spend as much time as possible out of the house by herself. She spends long periods walking around without any particular purpose. She takes to people-watching, directing scrutiny toward women in particular and wondering if they’re married. When she sees happy couples, she regards them as somehow fake or fraudulent.

One day, Iris suddenly sees Alex Thomas again, on the other side of the street from where she was walking. The smart thing to do would be to ignore him, but instead she crosses the street immediately, walking right into a throng of traffic. She stretches out her hand toward him, which in itself is the first act of “treachery.”

Three days after Iris’s encounter with Alex, Laura is supposed to arrive. However, as Iris waits for her at Union Station, Laura never shows up. Speaking over the phone, Reenie assured Iris that she’d seen Laura off on the train. Yet while Laura’s trunk arrived, Iris’s sister was nowhere to be seen. Richard expresses concern that she could have been kidnapped. Richard is also worried about a workers’ march that took place in Ottawa in July and he accuses Alex of being involved. When the marchers’ demands were refused, riots ensued. Richard suggests that this might be the reason why Laura was delayed, which Iris thinks is an unfounded fear.

After two days pass and there is still no sign of Laura, Iris and Richard contact the police. Following this, someone gives an anonymous tip that they saw Laura alive and well, working in Sunnyside Amusement Park. Iris and Richard plan to go and get her immediately, concerned that the media will find out, which would cause a scandal. Sunnyside is a popular vacation destination, although Richard and Winifred would never have gone there. Iris recounts that at some point later, Winifred mentioned that she believed unmarried girls who’d become pregnant went on the Sunnyside roller-coaster in order to end their pregnancies. At this point, Iris did not even know what an abortion was.

*Again, Iris’s isolation within her new married life is overpowering. It is made even worse by the fact that there is no purpose to her life—she doesn’t have a job, is no longer pursuing an education, isn’t a parent or caretaker for anyone else, and thus has nothing to occupy her time. Of course, Winifred hopes that Iris becomes a full-time socialite like Winifred herself, but it is hard to imagine Iris being satisfied with such a life.*



*This is a key moment in the novel, although it would be easy for it to pass by without the reader really noticing it. This is the last time Alex is mentioned in the main narrative for quite some time, and the fact that Iris’s encounter with him is not directly described lends a sense of ambiguity as to whether their meeting was casual or perhaps something more intimate.*



*Even in his concern for Laura, Richard can’t help but be self-centered and believe that whatever happened to her is actually connected to the resistance he is facing from workers. While it is true that Alex and Laura were close, Laura never expressed much direct interest in the labor movement, and it is thus unlikely that she somehow got involved in the workers’ struggles.*



*Despite now being married, Iris remains almost as sheltered as ever. Getting married is ostensibly the moment when a woman like Iris transitions from being a child to an adult, but in this case she has retained the status of a child, with Richard and Winifred strangely acting like her parents. Indeed, if Laura is indeed working at Sunnyside, she has achieved far more maturity and independence than Iris has.*



At Sunnyside, Richard approaches the owner of the waffle booth and informs him that he's been employing a "juvenile runaway." The owner praises Laura as a nice girl, protesting that he didn't know anything about her background. Back at Richard's house, he sternly tells Laura that she's caused a great deal of trouble, yet she seems unmoved by this fact. The stern way Richard speaks to Laura worries Iris. Laura seems to have wanted to join the throng of ordinary life, yet this is an impossibility. Later, she tells Iris that she can't bear to live in Richard's house because he "killed" Norval. Iris denied this, saying that Norval "died because of an unfortunate combination of circumstances." Laura begs Iris to find a way for them to escape before it's "too late," then she weeps inconsolably.

In the present, Iris dreams about the Xanadu ball— except rather than being surrounded by partygoers, she is alone in **Avilion**. Back in 1935, Richard and Winifred ensure that no one finds out about Laura's escape attempt, inventing a story about a miscommunication over Laura's vacation plans. Yet as implausible as this story seems, people at least pretend to believe it's true. Laura begins school at St. Cecilia's, which she hates. She continues to bite her nails and starve herself, growing worryingly thin. Richard becomes increasingly angry about Laura's behavior, insisting that Laura needs a "firm hand" after having been spoiled for so long. He seeks Winifred's advice rather than Iris's—it's clear to Iris that her own role is to be a sexual object for Richard.

Winifred keeps Iris occupied with various meaningless tasks, including organizing the Xanadu ball. Events like this are "by invitation only," and the question of who is invited is treated as a matter of great seriousness. Laura isn't yet old enough to attend the ball, although Winifred is in the process of organizing Laura's *début*. However, Laura is fascinated by the Coleridge poem *Kubla Kahn* from which the name (and concept) of Xanadu is taken. The ball takes place in the second week of January. While Iris is trying on her "Abyssinian Maid" costume, Laura comes into her room.

Laura interrogates Iris about *Kubla Kahn*, but Iris dismissively replies that it's just a poem and she doesn't know what it means. Unexpectedly, Laura then announces that she recently saw Alex. She says that she didn't say hello to him in order to protect him from the attention of the authorities. Iris asks if Laura still had a crush on Alex, to which Laura replies that she never did, protesting, "*Crush* is a horrible word." Iris warns her that in any case, she should let go of her attachment to Alex.

*In this part of the novel, Laura becomes an increasingly sympathetic character. Whereas before she might have been characterized as overly sensitive and naïve, at this point she has proven herself to be headstrong, independent, and willing to support herself. Yet she remains completely trapped by the social norms of the time, which dictated that women were to be controlled by their closest male relative. Because Laura isn't married and her father is dead, this relative is Richard.*



*Again, Laura's utter powerlessness means that she resorts to tactics of self-sacrifice and self-harm (via starvation) as a way of protesting her plight. She is given no control over her own life and has no ability to retaliate against those harming her, and as a result she chooses to retaliate against herself.*



*The notion of the social elite of Toronto dressing up as maids and slaves is in poor taste given that the Great Depression recently occurred. Meanwhile, the fact that Iris is agreeing to comply with Winifred's desires to turn her into a socialite makes her a less sympathetic (or at least certainly less admirable) character than the rebellious Laura during this part of the novel.*



*Again, Iris is notably reticent in this passage regarding her own encounter with Alex, leaving the reader wondering what she said to him when they saw each other and whether they have seen each other since. The fact that Laura is more honest with her sister than the other way around increases the extent to which Laura is presented as the more sympathetic character.*



## CHAPTER 8

In **The Blind Assassin**, the man moves again, away from the building with the janitor's room. He moves to a new neighborhood where Emma Goldman is supposedly also living after having been exiled from the U.S. It is a poor, Jewish neighborhood filled with immigrants. The woman buys three apples as a "peace offering" for the man. Later, in bed, the man asks where the woman has been, noting that it has been weeks since he last saw her. However, the woman hesitates, saying that they should get back to the story instead. In the man's story, the blind assassin tells the Servant of Rejoicing that he and the girl have a holy message for him, but that it must be delivered in private.

Once the blind assassin is alone with the girl and the Servant of Rejoicing, he tells the Servant he will instruct him how to sneak into **Sakiel-Norn**. First, the Servant should send a few men to give the password (which the assassin knows) at the gate, then these men should float a rope back down the canal so more of the People of Joy can pull themselves in against the current. Once enough people are inside, they can kill the guard at the gate and open it for all the rest to join. However, the assassin says that before any of this happens, he and the girl must make a kind of holy pilgrimage to a mountain.

This mountain is where the escaped slaves of **Sakiel-Norn** live in peaceful communities. They pretend to be wolves and undead women in order to scare away others and protect themselves, but in reality they will accept the girl and the blind assassin as fellow fugitives. The woman expresses shock that the man ends his story with private escape into a life of contentment rather than championing the greater good for all, but the man says that he is just reflecting historical truths. He says that while the blind assassin and the girl escape, the People of Joy raze Sakiel-Norn, killing all its inhabitants, so that "An entire culture is wiped from the universe."

The blind assassin and girl escape, only to learn that the supposedly peaceful community of fugitives really is made up of undead women and wolves who eat them alive. The woman complains about this twist, but the man says that he must honor the way things are in reality, which means that there must be wolves. The woman asks the man if he is ever "unfaithful," to which he replies, "No more than you are to me." Yet after teasing her, he assures her that he never sleeps with other women. The woman then reveals the thing she had to tell him: she is going away for a month on a trip related to the upcoming war. The man is angry, even when the woman insists that she doesn't want to go and doesn't enjoy the luxurious life she leads.

*The detail about Emma Goldman living in the neighborhood is a reminder that the novel is a work of historical fiction with close references to the real events that were occurring in Toronto at the time. Emma Goldman was a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant to the U.S. who ended up being deported to Canada due to her anarchist activities. The fact that she and Alex are hiding in the same neighborhood gives a sense of the kind of subversive activities with which Alex may have been involved.*



*At the Labour Day dinner in the main narrative, Alex explained that he survives by his wits. Given that the man in The Blind Assassin is based on Alex, there is a clear parallel between Alex's life and what's happening in the man's science-fiction story. In this part of the story the man is telling, the blind assassin uses his wits to manipulate the Servant of Rejoicing into allowing him and the girl to escape. There is evidently an extent to which the blind assassin is a (somewhat idealized) version of Alex himself: highly skilled, ingenious, brave, and good at escaping from the clutches of authority.*



*The destruction of Sakiel-Norn has an ambiguous status within the overall narrative. On one hand, the man presented Sakiel-Norn as a decidedly evil society with corrupt values and horrific levels of violence. At the same time, it is a tragedy for any civilization to be entirely "wiped from the universe," particularly considering it will not have only been the evil Snilfards who were exterminated, but the oppressed Ygniroids too.*



*The man's frequent claim that he must honor the reality of life is interesting considering the fact that he is not a writer of social realism, but rather science fiction. Of course, all science fiction inevitably reflects human culture to some degree, due to the fact that it is written by humans. At the same time, there is no demand that the worlds of science fiction resemble the real world, and it is thus curious that the man uses this excuse as a reason for why his stories are so depressing and brutal.*



A July 1936 article in *Mayfair* describes a luxury ship called the *Queen Mary*, comparing it to “a Waldorf-Astoria hotel,” afloat. Dances take place every evening onboard, with women dressed in the latest fashions.

*The fact that this luxury liner makes its debut while the world has not yet fully recovered from the Depression highlights the hypocrisy and injustice of capitalism.*



In **The Blind Assassin**, the woman asks the man why he tells such sad stories, and he replies, “That’s the kind of stories I know.” Then he says if she insists on hearing a happy story, he can tell her one. This story is set on the Planet Xenor in the 99th year of the “Hundred Years’ War.” The aliens who live on Xenor are Lizard Men who are highly intelligent but also evil. They aim to capture Earthlings and breed a “super-race” of human-Lizard Men who would conquer the universe.

*While it is true that the man’s life is blighted by sadness, it also seems true that his desire to tell sad stories stems less from his personal experiences and more from the fact that he wants to convey the sadness of the world at large. This is shown by the fact that he is disdainful of the woman’s desire to hear happy stories, as if he wants to burst the bubble of her privilege and naïveté.*



The Lizard Men first invade Earth in 1967 in an attack that kills millions of humans. However, the Earthlings fight back, and by 2066 they’re close to defeating the Xenorians. Two of the human fighters engaged in the war are a pair of old friends named Will and Boyd, who find themselves cornered by Lizard Men. Believing that they are facing death, the friends still manage to find a way to joke with each other. However, they are then suddenly yanked into a gravity field, causing them to pass out. When Will and Boyd regain consciousness, they are lying on golden sofas wearing shiny green robes. They feel peaceful and healthy.

*This kind of pulpy, salacious story was, again, very popular during this era. It is clear from the way in which the man can instantly construct one of these narratives that he’s had a lot of practice writing them.*



Suddenly, two extraordinarily beautiful women with golden skin and bizarre red net headdresses enter the room. The women welcome Will and Boyd to the planet Aa’A, informing the men that they fell there out of the sky and that their spacecraft was destroyed in the crash. The women express gratitude to the men for protecting Aa’A from the Xenorians. There are no men on Aa’A, meaning the women are virgins. The man doesn’t explicitly describe what happens next, but he indicates that Will and Boyd have sex with the women. Aa’A turns out to be a paradise where the men’s every need is fulfilled. No one is born or dies there—instead, the women renew themselves.

*While there is nothing inherently wrong with the kind of widely popular, salacious science-fiction stories from which the man makes his living, as this example shows they did often (though not always) perpetuate stereotypes. This included racial stereotypes, but also, as is the case here, vulgar and objectifying stereotypes of women.*



Despite the seemingly perfect nature of life on Aa’A, however, Will and Boyd soon grow dissatisfied. Even if they hit the women, they can’t really harm them and they suspect that the women don’t feel real pleasure either. They explored the planet and, having seen its contours, conclude that they are inside “a big transparent tit.” Will concluded that Aa’A was “too good to be true” and that it therefore “must be a trap.” The man ends the story here, saying that the woman wants a happy story and that now she has one. The woman tells the man that he is wrong about the peach women of Aa’A, though she won’t explain why.

*In this passage, it becomes clear that the man is not so much making fun of the kinds of stories he is writing, but rather the woman’s desire for a “happy” story. Happiness, the man seems to believe, is a foolish illusion. Indeed, his representation of the false paradise of Aa’A could be seen as a communist critique of capitalist culture, in which consumerist pleasures and the fulfillment of desires are seen as the point of life.*



A September 19, 1936 article in *The Mail and Empire* describes a speech Richard Griffen gave to the Empire Club in which he condemned the actions of the leftist Republicans and said that General Franco's far-right intervention was inevitable. He recommends that Canada refrain from intervening in the Spanish Civil War, yet he adds that the fact that Canadian communists are traveling to fight in Spain could be seen as a good thing as it relieves the burden they place on the Canadian taxpayer.

*The fact that Richard—a Canadian businessman who has no special expertise or insight into global politics other than being rich—is given a platform to comment on foreign policy could be read as another indictment of capitalist culture.*



In **The Blind Assassin**, the man brings the woman to the Top Hat Grill. It is a depressing establishment, populated by lonely, dejected men and off-duty sex workers. As the man recommends the hot beef sandwich to the woman, the woman is suspicious as to why they are going out to eat rather than staying in his room like they usually do. The man jokes that he can pay for the meal thanks to “the Lizard Men of Xenor.” He sold the story, and the check arrived yesterday. Conscious of the strange way the man is talking, the woman asks if he's been drinking, but the man replies, “Not much.” He then reveals that he's leaving Canada.

*The man frequently behaves in a cynical, callous, and even caustic manner, but at this point it has become obvious that he does this as a method of self-protection when he is feeling frightened, sad, or angry. Although it is his choice to leave Canada, it is likely that he feels conflicted due to not wanting to leave the woman. However, he puts on a callous air in order to conceal his inner turmoil.*



The woman says that she wishes she could come with him, and the man is half-disappointed that she is not having a more extreme reaction. The woman promises to wait for the man and to run away with him when he comes back. The man asks her to “leave him now,” but the woman replies that if she did, she would be stuck without any money. She makes the man promise that he'll come back alive, saying that she doesn't know what she'd do if he didn't. The man suggests they go back to his room.

*In this passage, it becomes more explicitly clear that the woman is married to another man. This is a key piece of information: the man is quite clearly based on Alex Thomas, but if the woman is married then she may not be based on Laura as has been indicated thus far. Perhaps, then, she is actually based on Iris.*



## CHAPTER 9

Myra brings Iris a new, healthy breakfast cereal to eat, and because of this, Iris makes an effort to sit at the table and use a napkin while eating. She knows that it is easy to let your behavior slip when living alone. Myra also does Iris's laundry, but she's been thinking about hiring another woman to do these tasks, as her back is getting bad. Iris is resistant to his prospect as she doesn't want a stranger involved in her life. As a result, that Sunday Iris decides to do her laundry herself to prove to Myra that she still can.

*This passage helps explain Iris's ambivalent attitude toward Myra. While she clearly finds Myra somewhat annoying and intrusive, she also perceives her as familiar (and indeed on some level family), which means that she doesn't mind Myra being involved in her life.*



However, while Iris is walking down the stairs to the cellar, she immediately realizes she is making a mistake. She perceives the ground at the bottom of the stairs as a dark pool of water and hears a “gurgling sound.” She turns around and flees as quickly as possible. She makes herself a cup of tea and longs for Reenie. However, without Reenie there, Iris has resolved to take care of both herself and Laura, just like she promised she would many years ago. She returns to telling her story, going back in time to the spring of 1936 when the Spanish Civil War had begun.

Laura is living with Iris and Richard, though she avoids them as much as possible. Laura has stopped being rude to Richard’s face, but she leaves any room he enters. At breakfast, Richard reads the newspaper and comments on how Hitler was a “smart fellow.” Iris makes a sound of agreement, but she isn’t really listening. At this point, Winifred thinks Iris is a harmless fool. Years later, Winifred tells Iris, “I used to think you were stupid, but really you’re evil.” During this conversation, Iris will claim that Richard was the one to burn down the button factory, while Winifred will accuse Laura and Iris of killing him.

Back in 1936, however, Winifred still treats Iris as her “protégée.” Lately, people have been asking Iris when Richard is going to make his “big announcement” related to his political career, but Iris has no idea. By this point, she and Richard have sunk into a routine of living two almost entirely separate lives. Increasingly, Richard leaves bruises on Iris’s skin, though never on her arms to make sure it doesn’t harm his political career.

In the present day, Myra takes Iris to the doctor, who has a rough manner. Iris complains that she’s dreaming too much that it’s interrupting her sleep, and the doctor replies that “a bad conscience” must be to blame, although it is clear that he is joking. In April 1936, Richard and Iris receive a phone call from the headmistress at St. Cecilia’s complaining about Laura’s behavior. Richard is busy with business, so Iris goes to the school to meet with the headmistress herself. The headmistress explains that the school has been trying their best, but that they now have no choice but to expel Laura. During Religion, the only subject in which Laura is remotely engaged, she’s been pointing out logical flaws and inconsistencies in the Bible and demanding answers.

*Iris’s longstanding resolve to take care of herself and Laura is interesting, considering the reader knows at this point that Laura is long dead. However, one of the ideas conveyed in the novel is that it is possible—and indeed important—to take care of people even after they are dead, in part by preserving and honoring their memory.*



*The way Iris behaves in this passage may decrease the sympathy the reader has for her, and diminish the sense that she should be pitied in the context of her marriage to Richard. Clearly Richard harbors abhorrent views, particularly his admiration of Nazism. Yet rather than challenging these views or even really hearing them, Iris retreats into a world of her own. While it’s true that she has little power over Richard, her behavior could still be seen as a form of complicity with his politics.*



*Iris manages to achieve a degree of peace and respite due to the chasm between her life and Richard’s. However, his physical abuse of her suggests that she will never be totally free of his power. The woman in *The Blind Assassin* also has bruises on her skin, which is a second clue that the woman may be based on Iris rather than Laura.*



*Due to the fact that the conventional familial relationships in the novel are largely corrupted or destroyed, many of the characters take on surrogate familial roles for each other. At times, Reenie behaves as Iris and Laura’s surrogate mother, whereas in this passage Iris takes on the role of Laura’s parent. The most disturbing of the surrogate relations are the moments when Richard and Winifred assume a kind of parental role over Iris, limiting her agency as though she is a child rather than an adult woman.*



Iris defends Laura, saying that Laura is just curious. However, the headmistress says that Laura has been scaring some of the other girls, who think that she's mentally unstable or a Bolshevik, and she has too much of an influence over others. The headmistress also mentions Laura's health problems, and at this point it became clear that Laura has been forging Iris's signature in order to excuse herself for fake doctor's appointments. At this point, Iris gets up to leave, saying she'll speak to Laura. To Iris's surprise, Richard isn't angry about this news. Instead, he seems entertained and even impressed. Later, Iris confronts Laura, and Laura explains that she never wanted to go to St. Cecilia's.

In May, Iris, Laura, Richard, and Winifred go to England, returning on the maiden voyage of the *Queen Mary*. The ship is celebrated as the very epitome of luxury, but Richard doesn't enjoy himself. Used to being a big fish in a small pond, he now finds that he's insignificant in comparison to the kind of people aboard. Winifred has similar problems. Laura, meanwhile, spends her evenings reading in her cabin, as she's too young to dance with everyone else. One morning, Laura and Iris spot a "brawny" woman who seems to be a professional dog-walker aboard the ship and Laura expresses a desire to become a dog-walker herself.

Iris asks Laura if she's okay, but Laura brushes her off. When Iris mentions that she promised their parents that she would take care of Laura, Laura replied that she "absolve[s]" Iris of this task. After Laura changes the subject, Iris doesn't think about it much again. Aside from this conversation, the thing Iris most remembers about the *Queen Mary* is how everything is monogrammed—the guests stole everything they could as souvenirs.

In the present day, Iris takes one of the sleeping pills prescribed by the doctor; it helps her get to sleep but doesn't stop her from dreaming. She has a frightening nightmare about Laura, who in the dream is an old woman but still has a child's voice. Back in the past, Iris and her family disembark the *Queen Mary* in New York and stay there for a few days. Richard has business and suggests the women go sightseeing, but Laura doesn't want to. They then go to Toronto for a few weeks, followed by **Avilion**. Lately, Iris has been noticing that Richard seems intrigued by Laura and that he wants to figure her out. She notices Richard staring at Laura and she believes he's imagining himself finally gaining control over her.

*Part of what makes Laura such an enigmatic character is that she is so full of contradictions: she is devoutly religious yet gets in trouble for questioning God, and she's simultaneously shunned by other people yet manages to influence her fellow students at St. Cecilia's. These conflicting qualities mean that the other characters in the novel don't understand her, and the reader might experience similar feelings of confusion.*



*This passage contains a useful example of how Laura is the total opposite of Richard and Winifred. In true capitalist fashion, Richard and Winifred are not satisfied with their significant wealth and power but instead grow resentful because there are other people who are even more wealthy and powerful than them. Laura, meanwhile, craves an ordinary, humble job far more than the life of luxury that's been presented to her.*



*Laura seems dismissive and even resentful of the idea that Iris feels a responsibility to take care of her. Although it is not explicitly clear why, it could be that Laura believes Iris has already failed in this task and thus might as well give up.*



*Given Richard's physical abuse of Iris, it's possible that his interest in Laura is more sinister than what Iris assumes. The fact that it never occurs to Iris that Richard's fixation on Laura could be sexual is evidence of her naïveté. Yet the question remains: can she be blamed for this ignorance, or does the very fact that she is too innocent to perceive Richard's predatory behavior mean that she shouldn't be blamed? It is a difficult question, one that Atwood largely leaves the reader to judge for themselves.*



Laura is not particularly excited about the prospect of going to **Avilion**, but she does look forward to seeing Reenie—until Richard informs her that Reenie has been dismissed. When they get to Avilion, Winifred walks around the house complaining about the dust while Richard goes to inspect Norval's old boat, the *Water Nixie*. After Winifred goes off to nap, Laura tells Iris that Reenie yelled at Callie at Norval's funeral, chastising her for not coming earlier while Norval was dying. Laura recalls the Christmas when Norval dressed up as Santa Claus, just before Liliana died. Iris argues that this was an example of Norval trying his best to be a good father, but Laura says she hated it. She explains that she thought the Santa Claus outfit was Norval's true self and that all the rest of the time he'd been "pretending."

Presently, Iris is awoken by the sound of Myra arriving at her house. She has brought the Portuguese woman who will henceforth be working as Iris's cleaner. Iris wonders if Myra is her guardian angel or "a foretaste of Purgatory." Returning to the story, Iris recalls that she and Laura went to see Reenie on their second day at **Avilion**. She was now working three days a week at Betty's Luncheonette in town. Iris and Laura bring a teddy bear for Reenie's baby. As soon as Reenie opens the door to her small cottage, Laura starts crying. The cottage is shabby but has been decorated with care. Reenie brings the girls in to see her baby, Myra.

In an aside, Iris addresses Myra directly. She admits that there have been times when she has wondered if Norval was Myra's father, not Ron, which would make Myra the half-sister of Iris and Laura. Back in the past, the rest of Iris's stay at **Avilion** is hot and uncomfortable. She passes the time leafing through scrapbooks or old magazines. Laura, on the other hand, spends all her time outside. Richard works on the *Water Nixie*, determined to get it functioning again. One day at lunch, Richard looks at the newspaper and announces the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. Laura is once again not eating, instead going to the sea with only a cup of coffee. Richard comments that the war could provide a useful boost to the economy.

Winifred mentions that Callie was recently arrested during a roundup at "a pinko party." She called, trying to get through to Iris, and Richard ended up bailing her out. Richard ignores this statement. Feeling uncomfortable, Iris announces that she's going to join Laura by the water, but Richard tells her to stay put so as not to "encourage" Laura. Shortly before they leave **Avilion**, Iris goes up to the attic and found Laura already there, surrounded by the Chase family's old belongings. Laura explains to Iris that she's saving them so that Winifred and Richard can't throw them away. She shows Iris some of Alex's old notebooks, though she doesn't mention him by name.

*Laura's strange interpretation of Norval dressing up as Santa Claus emphasizes the fact that she has a unique way of comprehending the world around her. While to most other people (including young children) it would be obvious that Norval was dressing up for fun, Laura's conviction that the Santa Claus outfit was Norval's true self conveys her strangely literal and somewhat paranoid way of processing her surroundings.*



*Iris's resentment of Myra again may decrease the sympathy the reader has for her. While it is clear why Iris might find Myra somewhat irritating, it also seems that Myra is genuinely trying to take care of Iris and make her life easier. Furthermore, the flashback scene featured in this passage emphasizes that, because Reenie was a kind of surrogate mother to Iris, there is an extent to which Myra is a kind of sister figure to Iris. Yet rather than loving Myra, Iris pities herself for having to endure her presence.*



*Iris's surprising speculation that Norval may be Myra's father appears without much context, and there are no other points in the novel in which there is evidence of a sexual relationship between Norval and Reenie. Perhaps rather than truly thinking that Norval and Reenie had sex, Iris does feel on some level that Myra is her sister due to the fact that Reenie is a kind of surrogate mother figure to her. At the same time, uncertainty surrounding the paternity of a baby foreshadows important events later in the novel.*



*The detail that Richard bailed out Callie should signal alarm bells in the reader's mind, as it is a totally out-of-character act that is not properly explained. Richard hates communists ("pinko" was a derogatory term for communists and communist sympathizers) and believes that the state should harshly punish anyone related to the movement. Given this, the fact that he chooses to bail out Callie, whom he supposedly doesn't even know well, suggests that Richard may somehow be using Callie to get to Alex.*



Suddenly, Laura brings up Mr. Erskine and recalls that Iris never believed her, although Reenie did. Laura wonders if he's dead or if anyone has caught him yet. The day before the family is due to leave **Avilion**, Winifred and Iris are sitting together when Winifred points out that Richard successfully managed to get the *Water Nixie* to sail and that he and Laura are now out on it together. Iris is puzzled. She's noticed that Richard and Laura's behavior has reversed: now it is him who leaves the room whenever she enters it.

In the present, Iris addresses the reader directly. She admits that what she's written thus far is wrong—not because of what she's included, but because of what she's left out. The previous night, Iris believed that she awoke from a dream to the sound of clinking on her window. Looking outside, she saw a chestnut tree there, which is odd because there is no chestnut tree outside this house—although there was one outside the house she shared with Richard. She looked out and saw a drunk man stumbling along the street who looked up and waved at her. She wanted to call out to him, but suddenly Richard was there with his hands around her neck. Then Iris actually woke up, her face covered with tears. She realized that the clinking glass sound she heard was being made by two racoons across the street.

## CHAPTER 10

In **The Blind Assassin**, the woman has been looking for the man's story about the Lizard Men of Xenor in science-fiction magazines for weeks—today, she finally finds it. She is overcome with excitement but knows she can't buy a copy in this store because the people there know her. She waits until the next time she goes out and slips into the train station. Smuggling the magazine into the bathroom at home, she flips through the pages, desperate to know what happens to the blind assassin and the girl.

In the story, **Sakiel-Norn** is attacked by the Lizard Men of Xenor. As a result, the class hierarchy of the city dissolves, with Snilfards and Ygnirods united in fighting a common enemy. The Xenorians, meanwhile, are only able to capture a few women from outside the gates of Sakiel-Norn before they are forced to retreat. The Xenorians regroup, hoping to find a solution to the technical problems that leave them vulnerable to the Zycronians. This installment of the story ends there, and the woman is disappointed to have heard nothing about the girl and the blind assassin. Over the next few months, she desperately awaits an update to the story, searching the magazines at every store. However, the next installment is never published.

*Again, Richard's bizarre behavior surrounding Laura, in combination with his abusive tendencies, suggests that he is perhaps having an inappropriate relationship with Laura. In particular, the unexpected occurrence of Laura and Richard on the boat together is very important. When Richard dies, his body is found in this same boat on the same body of water. This suggests that the boat comes to be significant for him and that this significance may have something to do with the day he spends sailing with Laura.*



*Here, Iris meditates on the nature of truth and memory, introducing the idea that what one omits is just as important to the truth of a story as what one includes. In this way, Atwood further characterizes Iris as an unreliable narrator. Meanwhile, Iris appears to be simultaneously haunted by the ghosts of Richard and Norval. It is notable that both her husband and father die of apparent yet unconfirmed suicides. This may be connected to the fact that she feels haunted by them, as if—despite her best efforts—she can't quite convince herself that she is not partly responsible for their deaths.*



*While it may seem as if the woman is simply keen to know what takes place in the science-fiction story after the cliffhanger ending with which the man left it, this is obviously not the real reason why she is so desperate to read the story. Instead, she wants any form of connection she can get to the man while he is away.*



*The fact that the man abandoned the storyline of the girl and the blind assassin could be taken as evidence that he has abandoned his investment in his romantic affair with the woman. Perhaps now that he is overseas (presumably fighting in the Spanish Civil War, although this is not explicitly stated in The Blind Assassin), he no longer has any interest in maintaining an affair with the woman. On the other hand, it's possible that he abandoned the storyline for much more innocuous reasons.*



The May 1937 gossip column of *Mayfair* magazine announces the birth of Iris's daughter, Aimee Adelia Chase Griffen. Winifred threw a luncheon in honor of Iris and the new baby that was attended by many prominent society women.

*Once again, the magazine column provides a tantalizing glimpse into the events to come without providing any context, thereby building narrative suspense. Given that the reader already knows Aimee dies at a relatively young age (not unlike Lilianna, Norval, Laura, and Richard), the events that lead up to her death throughout the next few decades remain to be seen.*



In a letter written to Richard, the director of the BellaVista Sanctuary, Dr. Gerald P. Witherspoon, mentions how nice it was to meet Richard the previous Friday. Dr. Witherspoon shares the unfortunate news that Laura's condition has not improved. She is still suffering from "delusions," and the staff at BellaVista are planning to try electro-shock therapy. Dr. Witherspoon asks that Richard and Iris don't visit or contact Laura because communicating with them will likely derail her recovery. He also encloses the bill for Laura's treatment.

*Like the newspaper articles, this letter foreshadows the events that are yet to appear in the main narrative. However, rather than heralding seemingly happy news (as in the case of Aimee's birth), this foreshadowing is deeply ominous and sinister. The reader is left wondering whether Laura did anything to justify being institutionalized or whether Richard sent her to the clinic for another reason.*



In **The Blind Assassin**, the woman feels "heavy" and dirty, like she has been "buried alive." She isn't alone, but the other people buried with her don't realize what's happened. She feels that the only way to escape is through climbing on the roof of her house up to the open sky. There's a baby near her, which she sometimes hears crying. She's propped up with pillows as she drifts in and out of sleep, thinking about "him" thinking about her. She remembers how biting and argumentative she and the man were to each other, and she longs for him. The man had wanted to protect her. He once accused her of leading "a sheltered life," to which she replied that he was the only hope of her escaping it.

*This passage once again parallels the main narrative. It is a dreamlike and surreal depiction of the aftermath of the baby (Aimee's) birth, which suggests that the woman (Iris) may be suffering from postpartum depression. She certainly seems to be detached from reality, which can occur in people who experience this condition. This is also one of the moments when the narrative of *The Blind Assassin* and the main narrative clearly line up temporally, making it all the more clear that Iris, not Laura, is the woman in the embedded novel.*



An article in the *Globe and Mail* dated May 26, 1937 reports on clashes in Barcelona between different Republican factions, notably the Communists (who are backed by the U.S.S.R.) and the alliance between the Trotskyists and the Anarchists. The Republicans retain power in much of the rest of the country, but Franco's forces are "making significant gains."

*This interlude of information from the Spanish Civil War is ominous, as the gains made by Franco's forces threatens the man's wellbeing. Given that the man is representative of Alex in the main narrative, this perhaps portends danger for him as well.*



In **The Blind Assassin**, the woman dreams of the man getting on a train and sitting next to an elderly woman knitting a red sweater. She then imagines him falling asleep and dreaming of her, just like she is dreaming of him. After the train journey is over, she pictures the man arriving in a city where she is waiting to find him. However, she can't reach him, and soon he begins to disappear.

*Although the woman is said to be dreaming here, this is not made explicitly clear. The overall dreamlike nature of this part of *The Blind Assassin* makes it difficult to distinguish dreams from reality, thereby recreating the woman's hallucinatory mental state.*



## CHAPTER 11

Iris explains that this is where the story takes “a darker turn,” which will come as no surprise to the reader considering they already know what happened to Laura. Laura herself was not aware of her fate as “the doomed romantic heroine”; she was just an ordinary person with a whole range of experiences and emotions. Looking back on the narrative Iris has written so far, she feels it is too superficial and shallow. At the same time, the truth is that terrible tragedies are often surrounded by “frivolity.” Today, Iris manages to walk to the cemetery using her cane. Someone has cleaned up Laura’s grave and left flowers that are already wilting, which Iris considers “trash.”

After the cemetery, Iris stops at the doughnut shop and is pleasantly surprised by the friendliness of the young waitress. Resentfully, she thinks about Sabrina’s “ingratitude.” In the bathroom, Iris reads the scribbles on the cubicle walls. Sometimes she chooses to believe that these are the work of Laura, and sometimes she feels tempted to add something herself.

In the fall of 1936, Laura is sent to a new school, and in November she turns 17. At this point, she tells Richard that his money is being wasted on her school fees because she will never need to get a job and thus doesn’t need to be educated. Following this announcement, Winifred recruits Laura to work for a charitable group called the Abigails, which visits people in hospital. All the other members of this group resemble Winifred, and although Laura doesn’t, she still thrives in this new role. Laura is unfazed by excrement and vomit and she’s especially skilled at handling the terminally ill. Winifred considered this suspect and bizarre.

Winifred is still going ahead with planning Laura’s *début*, although she shares none of this information with Laura herself. One day, Winifred invites Iris to lunch at the Arcadian Court so they can plan things together. Winifred expresses her hope that a rich, “stupid” man will marry Laura as soon as possible. She speaks about how Laura is strange and holds odd opinions, such as the idea that only love matters, not marriage, and that this was what Jesus believed, too. Iris finds it hard to picture Laura agreeing to marry a man too foolish to understand who she really is. She mentioned that Laura will inherit money at 21 and that this might be enough for her to live independently. Winifred scoffs at the idea.

*The reader might find it surprising to hear Iris explicitly announce that the story is about to take “a darker turn,” considering it has featured (and alluded to) many tragic events thus far. However, what Iris means by this clearly has something to do with her relationship with Laura. While the sisters have not always got along perfectly, up until this point they have still had a relatively strong bond, with each of them committed to caring for each other. This may be about to change.*



*Just as Iris dreamed of Richard and Norval and the chestnut tree, Laura’s ghost also haunts her. Iris sees Laura everywhere, a present part of the living world even though she died many years ago.*



*This passage illuminates the ridiculous paradox of what is considered acceptable behavior for upper-class women like Winifred and Laura. While volunteering for charity is perceived to be an important, noble pursuit for genteel women, it is frowned upon to embrace this role with too much zeal—a preposterous concept that reveals how little this charity work is actually concerned with the people it ostensibly seeks to help. Really, it is a vanity project.*



*One of the most puzzling things about Iris’s character is her apparent lack of opinion on almost all topics. Winifred’s horror at Laura’s views on love and marriage is consistent with what a woman of her position would likely have thought at the time, whereas Laura’s beliefs themselves are inspired by a plausible reading of the Bible. Iris seems to neither agree nor disagree with either of them, suggesting that she has no opinion of her own.*



Later, Iris tells Laura that Winifred is troubled by her statements about marriage and love. Laura defends herself, maintaining that what she said was simply “the truth.” Iris encourages Laura to think about marriage and be mindful of her future, but Laura replies, “The future doesn’t exist.” At the end of October, Iris tells Richard that she’s pregnant, and he reacts with calm approval. Iris is glad that her pregnancy means she doesn’t have to have sex with him. Winifred, meanwhile, seems alarmed by the possibility of Iris’s status increasing as a result of birthing an heir (particularly if the child turns out to be a boy). When Iris goes to Laura’s room to tell her the news, she finds Laura kneeling in a strange position. On hearing the news, Laura asks if Iris remembers the “kitten,” the stillborn baby that killed Liliana.

In the present day, Iris dreams that Reenie is scolding her. In her unconscious she is “on trial.” She wonders if she is blameworthy for not having been able to read Laura’s mind and detect what was going on with her. By February 1938, Iris is seven months’ pregnant. Walking downstairs from a nap, she finds Winifred and Richard sitting in the living room together, looking somber. Richard tells Iris to sit beside him, and he and Winifred explained that they sent Laura to the hospital after she accused Richard of trying to kill Iris and threatened to hurt herself. Richard assures Iris that the clinic where Laura is being held, BellaVista, is of the highest standard.

Iris says that she needs to see Laura, and then she starts to cry. At this point, Winifred reveals that Laura also claimed to be pregnant, though she hadn’t said who she thought the baby’s father was. Winifred explains that the specialist believes Laura is “insanely jealous” of Iris and wants to be her. A few months later, in April, Aimee is born. Iris was unconscious for the birth, which is conventional at the time. When Winifred and Richard come in to see Aimee, Winifred comments on her dark hair, saying they’d expected her to be blonde. Iris apologizes for the fact that Aimee is a girl when Richard had wanted a boy. Presently, Iris wonders if there was some part of her that was glad Laura wasn’t there to create any disturbance.

In the present day, Iris watches the news: a young woman set fire to herself in protest against an unspecified injustice. She worries that Sabrina could potentially get caught up in extremist ways of thinking over in India. Iris reflects on how Aimee must have been affected by Laura’s suicide, which happened when Aimee was eight, and Richard’s, which happened two years later. To make matters worse, Aimee then had to endure the custody battle that ensued between Iris and Winifred. Given all this, it is perhaps unsurprising that Aimee turned to substance abuse and sexual promiscuity. Iris notes that Aimee never revealed the identity of Sabrina’s father.

*Part of the reason why Laura is cast out from society is that she refuses to orientate her life around the things that are supposed to be meaningful to women, i.e., marriage and children. She has quite progressive views about marriage that anticipate many of the arguments made by the second-wave feminist movement. Meanwhile, her view of reproduction seems to be colored by the trauma of Liliana’s death, which—at least from a contemporary perspective—seems quite understandable. However, it totally alienates her from those around her.*



*Institutionalizing women who defied expectations for how they were supposed to behave was a common practice in the 19th and 20th centuries among bourgeois and upper-class families. The reasons cited for these institutionalizations were diverse and often horrifyingly mundane—things like mental illness, unconventional political views, or even normal displays of sexuality could get a woman institutionalized against her will.*



*The expert’s claim that Laura is hysterically jealous of Iris seems highly implausible. If anything, Laura seems horrified by Iris’s life and wants as little to do with it as possible. However, telling Iris that Laura is jealous of her appeals to what Iris wants to believe due to her and Laura’s lifelong sibling rivalry. Indeed, she admits here that there is even part of her that is relieved that Laura is not around for Aimee’s arrival into the world.*



*Atwood’s novel is a family saga stretching over multiple generations, yet it is intriguing that the younger generations (particularly Aimee and Sabrina) are not featured in the narrative nearly as prominently as the older ones. Of course, it is true that Iris ends up estranged from both her daughter and granddaughter—yet considering Adelia features prominently despite dying before Iris was born, this can’t be the only explanation.*



While Aimee is still alive, Iris never gives up hope that one day she and Aimee will reconcile—but Aimee rejected both Iris and Winifred. She's evicted, arrested, and imprisoned—though she's wealthy enough to not have to work. The last time Iris sees Aimee, she finds Sabrina outside Aimee's dilapidated house and introduces herself as Sabrina's grandmother. It's obvious that Sabrina had no idea she even had a grandmother. Aimee's neighbors are the ones to find her dead at the bottom of the stairs, although no one ever finds out if she killed herself by accident or on purpose. Presently, Iris regrets not running away with Sabrina the day she saw Aimee for the last time, before Winifred had a chance to get her.

When Iris finds Aimee in her kitchen, she's clearly drunk and high and is smoking a cigarette. Aimee doesn't want to listen to Iris; she says she knows the family has been lying to her to avoid giving her her inheritance. She claims that Iris and Richard aren't her real parents, citing Laura's book as evidence. When Iris asks her to elaborate, Aimee explains that it's obvious Laura is the woman in **The Blind Assassin**. She'd been in love with the man and had gotten pregnant, and when Iris's own baby died, Iris raised Laura's baby (Aimee) as her own in order to avoid scandal. Although this story is wrong, Iris can see why it appeals to Aimee.

Iris admits that she was a flawed parent, though she adds that there were extenuating circumstances that Aimee doesn't understand. Aimee accuses Iris of killing Laura, and a full-blown fight ensues. Frightened, Iris runs away, although presently she wonders if she should have stayed and tried to comfort Aimee rather than fleeing. Three weeks later, Aimee is dead. Following her death, Iris feels more grief over Aimee's lost potential and over her own failures as a mother than she does over the person Aimee actually was when she died.

Iris is 60 when Winifred assumes custody of Sabrina. Sometimes Iris drives to Toronto and idles outside of Sabrina's fancy private primary school, watching her. Later, she spies on Winifred and Sabrina Christmas shopping at the department store. She watches as they pass a group of carol singers and Sabrina is absorbed by "Good King Wenceslas," a song she must instinctively understand because it's about hunger. Iris is overcome with a desperate desire to grab Sabrina and run away with her, and she imagined Winifred's powerless scream if she were to do it. Iris daydreams about a version of the Rapunzel fairytale wherein Winifred and all her friends bestow gifts on Sabrina, only for Iris to appear out of the blue and announce that she, too, has a gift.

*Again, Atwood leaves it somewhat ambiguous as to whether Iris can be blamed for the estrangement between herself, Aimee, and Sabrina. While it is obvious that there were some factors beyond Iris's control causing this alienation, it's up to the reader to interpret whether or not she's entirely blameless. The narrative fails to provide quite enough information to reach a solid conclusion, a fact that—considering Iris is the narrator—could be interpreted as deliberate.*



*Aimee's beliefs about her parentage raise the question of her paternity. The reader knows that Iris met with Alex at least once after she was married to Richard, and the fact that Aimee believes the woman (who's actually based on Iris) and the man (who's based on Alex) are her real parents perhaps suggest that Alex could be her real father. At the same time, it is clear that Aimee's thinking has been distorted by trauma and substance abuse, making it impossible for Iris to communicate with her properly.*



*The fact that Iris fled from Aimee rather than staying to comfort her indicates that, although Iris was technically Aimee's parent, there were ways in which she still acted like a child around her. Part of the role of a parent is to set aside their own vulnerabilities in order to care for their children. Of course, this dynamic can be intensely complicated by drug abuse.*



*Again, Iris's habit of spying on Winifred and Sabrina and her daydreams about inhabiting a version of the Rapunzel fairytale all indicate that Iris is cannot help but approach this issue in a childlike manner. Perhaps as the result of being disempowered throughout her life, Iris cannot assert control like an adult. Indeed, during the era in which Iris was married to Richard, husbands often intentionally kept their wives in an infantilized position in order to control them.*



Decades prior, weeks pass after Laura's hospitalization. Richard forbids Iris from writing to her, saying it would hinder Laura's recovery. Iris is tormented by the idea of Laura alone and "tortured" in BellaVista. Meanwhile, Richard gives more and more political speeches, and Iris decides to pretend to be weak and unwell for as long as possible. Iris can't decide whether to believe Winifred's account of Laura's apparent mental instability. Iris is terrified of the prospect that Laura might be telling the truth and she torments herself with thoughts of what would happen to the baby if this were the case. If Laura really is pregnant, Iris thinks that the only possible father is Alex Thomas.

By the time summer comes, Winifred begins encouraging Iris to spend outside tending to her rock garden. Yet Iris knows that this garden isn't really hers in the same way that Aimee isn't really hers. Iris considers sneaking off to go and visit Laura in secret, but she's hesitant about the prospect of leaving Aimee behind with the nursemaid. Then, one day, Richard informs Iris that a man claiming to be Laura's lawyer and a trustee of her trust fund showed up at BellaVista and demanded they release her. Bewildered, the staff had let her go, and now Laura is missing. Richard asks if Iris had any idea where Laura is, but Iris insists that she doesn't.

As soon as Iris can, she set off to Port Ticonderoga to see Reenie, lying to Richard that Reenie is gravely ill. They agreed to meet at Betty's Luncheonette, and when Iris sees Reenie, she finds that she does, in fact, look unwell. At this point, Myra is probably three or four. In hushed tones, Reenie admits that she helped arrange for the "lawyer" to rescue Laura from BellaVista, explaining that the man is a distant cousin of Liliana's. Laura managed to sneak a letter out to Reenie via the BellaVista cook; she'd written to Iris, too, but Iris never received anything.

Reenie tells Iris that she can't repeat the things that happened to Laura because there are children present, and she refuses to reveal where Laura is now, as Laura thought it best if Iris didn't know. Reenie adds that Laura didn't seem insane, although she was very thin and spoke much less about God than she used to. Iris thanks Reenie for everything, and Reenie adds that Laura left a message for Iris before she was taken to BellaVista. Iris shows Reenie a photo of Aimee, and Reenie comments on how dark she is. When they said goodbye, Reenie didn't kiss Iris, though Iris fantasizes about throwing her arms around Reenie.

*This is one of the moments in the novel when Iris appears least sympathetic. It is hard to understand why she is tempted to believe the words of Winifred—an evidently cruel woman who hates Laura and doesn't care about her wellbeing—over those of Laura herself. Given Richard's abuse toward Iris and the novel's implication that he may have an inappropriate interest in Laura, it seems entirely possible that he is trying to cover something up by claiming that Laura is mentally ill. Meanwhile, Iris's belief that Alex would have to be the father of Laura's baby hearkens back to Aimee's insistence that the man in The Blind Assassin (who's based on Alex) is her real father, deepening the parallel between these two narratives.*



*One of the ways in which women like Iris were trapped in unhappy, abusive marriage was through their children. Once a woman had children with a man, he would be able to threaten her with losing custody of them if she tried to leave him. At the time, divorce was so stigmatized that simply wanting a divorce was often interpreted as a sign that a woman was an unfit mother.*



*Early in the novel, Reenie is presented as a somewhat conservative, rule-abiding character who would never dream of doing something that would invite scandal. However, in this part of the novel, she heroically proves to be more loyal to Laura and committed to justice than to following rules for the sake of them.*



*This is the second time that someone has mentioned Aimee's dark hair and complexion. When Winifred commented on this, she conveyed distaste at the fact that Aimee failed to live up to the WASP appearance that she imagined for her niece. At the same time, the fact that Reenie also comments on it suggests that there may be more to the story than that. Earlier in the novel, Reenie commented on Alex's dark complexion, too, which perhaps lends validity to Aimee's belief that the man in The Blind Assassin (who's based on Alex) is her real father.*



In the present, Iris spends the day lying in bed and watching daytime TV. She thinks about the way in which these kind of shows expose people's secrets to the whole world, and she wonders if it's better to be crushed under the weight of your own secrets or have them forced out of you. There is a bad smell in Iris's kitchen, and she wonders if some food has fallen down somewhere and is now rotting.

In the past, after seeing Reenie in Port Ticonderoga, Iris is left puzzled by the idea that Laura left a message for her before being institutionalized. Suddenly, she remembers finding Laura in Benjamin's study at the age of about 10 or 11, cutting out the passages of the Bible she didn't like. Iris was terrified that Laura would get in trouble, but Laura pointed out that no one in the family really looked inside the Bible—and it turned out she was right.

Iris suddenly realizes that Laura probably left the message in Iris's wedding album, where Richard and Winifred were certain not to accidentally find it. In the album, Laura had hand-tinted two photographs: in the first, Laura had been painted yellow while the Winifred and Richard were green. In the second, Richard's face was such a dark grey that it covered his features, while his hands were red and covered with flames. Meanwhile, Laura had painted Iris's face white such that it also became featureless. She'd also painted the surroundings of the bride and groom completely black.

## CHAPTER 12

An article in *The Globe and Mail* dated October 7, 1938 describes Richard giving a speech to the Empire Club in which he praises the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, and the Munich Accord. Richard claimed that "A strong, healthy Germany [...] was in the interests of the West, and of business in particular" and predicted that the 1940s would be a decade of economic prosperity. Meanwhile, a *Mayfair* article from June 1939 describes a party hosted by Lord and Lady Tweedsmuir in honor of the King's birthday. It notes that Iris and Richard were in attendance.

*Conventional wisdom dictates that holding in secrets is bad for a person, yet Iris's point about daytime TV is a useful reminder that exposing them for all to see can be harmful, too. The novel remains ambiguous as to whether there's a happy medium between keeping and revealing secrets.*



*Even as a child, Laura was hyperaware of the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of the world around her. She was raised in an ostensibly religious environment (albeit with an atheist for a father), yet realized quickly that people didn't actually take religion that seriously—and certainly not as seriously as she herself did.*



*The bizarre and enigmatic "message" that Laura leaves for Iris inside her wedding album suggests that Laura may indeed be having some kind of mental health breakdown after all. At the same time, perhaps Laura was relying on Iris being able to understand the message thanks to the special intuition that can be shared between sisters.*



*While the Chase-Griffen family secretly deals with the chaos of Laura's institutionalization, on the outside they maintain an appearance of perfect, genteel respectability. Indeed, the temptation to confine Laura in a clinic likely has something to do with the desire to make sure she's out of sight so as not to cause any scandals, particularly as Richard is running for political office.*



In **The Blind Assassin**, the woman waits at a train station on a humid day. The man arrives and they kiss each other only briefly, in case someone sees them. The man is skinny, and the woman can tell that he's nervous. He admits that he had difficulties on the journey home because he had no money. The woman brought a flask of scotch for him in her handbag, and they go to a cheap hotel with a "Beverage Room" on the ground floor. The "v" and second "e" on the neon sign are out, so it reads "Be rage Room" instead. The man apologizes for the grimy nature of the hotel, while the woman tries to put on a cheerful, carefree air.

The room is very dirty and there are no glasses, so they drink straight from the flask. The man says, "Well [...] Here we are again." The woman embraces him and says that she read the Lizard Men of Xenor story, which the man dismisses as trash. He explains that he was too busy to write the next installment. He says that he needs a drink, and the woman begs him not to sleep yet, although he does fall asleep for three hours. The woman knows she needs to leave and makes up an excuse in her head for when she gets home. The man wakes up, saying he wants another drink and a cigarette.

When the woman asks the man about the war, he says that he almost got killed. Although it was horrifying, he became used to it, and now he feels he can't acclimatize to civilian life again. In any case, he explains, a new war is about to begin. The woman doesn't want to believe this; she calls the man "cynical" and he calls her "naïve." She starts crying and the man comforts her. When the woman leaves, she's so emotional that she can barely see straight.

Perhaps one reason why people didn't see the war coming is that they were blinded by their own hope. Once it starts, the woman watches newsreels from the front in movie theaters. She's made a plan to get money by pawning her possessions. She'll then rent a cheap but pleasant enough room and write to her husband to say she's leaving for good. She'll subsist on a simple, economical diet and wait for the war end. She'll decorate her room to make it cozy and buy a second hand radio to hear news of the war. In reality, though, none of this will ever happen.

*Previously, both the man and the woman were genuinely able to overlook the grim surroundings in which they found themselves, seemingly because they were so passionately in love. However, something appears to have shifted here. The man has perhaps been changed by his experience of fighting in the Spanish Civil War—and the woman seems to have undergone a shift, too.*



*There is something heart-wrenchingly tragic about the woman's desire for her and the man to make the most of the few hours they have together. While on one level this can be perceived as highly romantic, in another light it is simply bleak. The fact that their union is doomed by the woman's marriage and by the war should arguably not be idealized, since there is arguably nothing romantic about infidelity, and certainly nothing romantic about war.*



*The man's point about having gotten used to the brutalities of war was a common problem for soldiers coming back from the front. Deeply traumatized and strangely assimilated into a world of high-stakes violence and death, many men found themselves profoundly alienated from ordinary civilian life.*



*Considering how unwilling the woman was to leave her husband up until this point, it seems clear that her dream here is little more than a fantasy she uses to comfort herself rather than a plan she would ever execute in reality.*



The woman receives a telegram informing her of the man's death. She pretends to treat it casually, wondering aloud why it was sent to her considering she isn't his next of kin. However, she then says she needs to sit down because she feels dizzy. The other people in the room with her chat casually while the woman, feigning nonchalance, wonders if the man was trying to make her feel guilty. However, the woman is not able to hide her emotions, and the people around her suggest she goes upstairs to lie down until she feels better.

The woman wakes up violently from a dream. She looks out the window past the chestnut tree and sees a man on the street, looking up and waving. Suddenly, the man is in the room; the woman wants to touch him, but she feels that if she does he would begin to "blur" and disintegrate. The man says that he promised he would come back. Suddenly, they are outside on the roof, and the whole city is burning. The woman realizes that she is in **Sakiel-Norn**, watching it be reduced to rubble. She suddenly feels frightened of the man—she knows he's dead because she received the telegram. The man disappears, and the woman feels overwhelmed by grief. Then, suddenly, she actually wakes up.

## CHAPTER 13

Iris admits that she is surprised to still be here, "talking to you." The ice on the Louveteau Gorge has almost completely melted. One body was found in the river that year, a drug user from Toronto who had an aunt and uncle in Port Ticonderoga. Walter comes over to do a check of the house and fix whatever needed fixing. Iris spends the day on the sofa like "some vaporous novelistic heroine who's been forgotten in the pages of her own books." She has been experiencing heart trouble again, and her doctor has expressed concern. Iris really needs a heart transplant, but she doesn't believe she could live knowing "the heart of a dead child" was inside her.

Iris makes coffee for Walter. When he comes in to drink it, Iris comments on the brand new yellow work gloves he's been wearing, and Walter explains that Myra bought them for him. Iris is gripped by an image of herself holding Walter's hand at night. She gently teases him, but then suddenly has another image, this time of Walter holding her coffin.

*The horrifying experience of receiving the news that her lover is dead but not being able to react to it—let alone grieve—is powerfully conveyed in this surreal passage. Again, there is a clear sense in which the rest of the world does not seem real to the woman. The only reality she knows is her life with the man, and that has now disappeared.*



*This passage is once again highly surreal, and the woman's mixed feelings of sadness, confusion, and fear show how the process of grief is rarely straightforward. When a person dies, all the emotions that those close to them felt about them do not suddenly turn into pure, simple love. The anger, irritation, resentment, jealousy, and fear that people feel for one another in life can continue after a person dies, too.*



*Iris's use of the second person (she refers to the reader directly as "you") toward the end of the main narrative is intriguing. Previously, she has stated that she doesn't know who the narrative she is writing is for and that she needs to pretend that she is writing to no one in order to tell the truth. However, this shifts here, as it seems like she now has a person in mind—although it is not clear who this person is.*



*Iris's strange attachment to Walter may simply be the result of her intense loneliness. It seems more likely that she fixates on him because he takes care of her rather than because she really believes they should be together romantically.*



Iris watches the news and is dismayed to see that “there’s another war somewhere.” She imagines the pileup of violence, destruction, rape, and death and thinks about the contrast to the “gentle, tedious backwater” of Port Ticonderoga. She admits that it’s common to have apocalyptic visions in old age and to feel grateful that one won’t be alive to live through it. Briefly, she struggles to remember what happened after the last point in the story where she left off, at the beginning of World War II. In the months leading up to the war, Richard and Iris’s marriage starts to crumble. Iris has two miscarriages, while Richard has several mistresses. At the time, people believe that men are powerless to control their “urges.”

Iris imagines that Richard’s mistresses are all young and beautiful, girls he hired to be his secretaries. He never considers divorcing Iris because it would jeopardized his political ambitions. Iris doesn’t care about his infidelities, but she tells herself to “Rise above it,” which is the advice Reenie would have given. At this point, Iris interrupts herself to say that she knows the depiction of Richard she’s constructed is two-dimensional. Yet she explains that this is because he is a mystery to her. His wealth and stature made him into nothing more than an image, something “hollow.”

The beginning of the war is a tricky time for Richard, who had aligned himself too closely with the Germans and ignored the crimes of the Nazi regime. The fact that he can no longer trade with Germany puts him in a highly precarious financial position, yet he ultimately manages to save himself through strategic “kowtowing.” At the same time, life in the Chase household becomes more austere. The war does bring greater freedom to women, and Iris learns how to drive. Then the war ends, although it takes a long time for the dust to settle.

In the present day, Iris walks to the Jubilee Bridge and then goes to the doughnut shop. In the bathroom, she accidentally bumps into a young woman with a foreign accent and thinks about how this girl belongs there, whereas Iris is “the stranger now.” In the bathroom stall, Iris sees a misquote of Laura: “Heaven is on the Planet Xenor.” Back in the past, the week after the official end of the war in Europe in May of 1945, Laura calls Iris. At first, Iris doesn’t recognize her sister’s voice. Laura says that she’s in Toronto but she won’t reveal her exact location. However, she does agree to let Iris pick her up in her car from a street corner.

*The fact that Richard has affairs while Iris experiences multiple miscarriages underlines his fundamental callousness. Yet the end of this passage serves as a reminder that at the time, the expectations placed on husbands were low compared to the modern day—people often refrained from blaming men for having extramarital affairs due to the perception that men had heightened sexual desires. Furthermore, the amount of emotional support a man was expected to provide to his wife—even in times of severe distress—was limited.*



*It is intriguing that Iris feels jealous and resentful of Richard’s affairs despite the fact that she hates him (and despite the fact that, according to the narrative in The Blind Assassin, she had been conducting an affair herself). This emphasizes that Iris is a somewhat petty and insecure person who still feels pressure to live up to an ideal that she herself rejects.*



*This passage explores the often unexpected side effects of war on those left at home. The shifts in the status of women that occurred during World War II were especially significant. Because so many young men were abroad fighting in the army, women ended up assuming roles that had traditionally been relegated to men. Perversely, the war majorly advanced feminism.*



*Iris is not only haunted by the sister she actually knew, but also by the image of Laura created by the publication of The Blind Assassin. Many people feel that Laura “belongs” to them as a result of reading the book; in this way, they put words in her mouth and, in doing so, misunderstand who she really was.*



When Iris collects Laura, she finds it difficult not to cry, but Laura seems unmoved. Laura seems different: even thinner than she was before, plus older, neater, and plainer. They go into a café called Diana Sweets, where Laura orders coffee and Iris orders tea. Laura explains that after escaping BellaVista, she went to **Avilion**. Reenie secretly kept a spare key after Richard had it locked up. She waited until she turned 21 and inherited the money from Norval, at which point she went to Halifax because that was “where the ships came in.” On finding out that Iris never received the letters she sent, Laura concluded that Richard must have stolen them. She tells Iris that he’s evil and that it’s dangerous for her to stay in the house with him.

Iris insists that she can’t divorce Richard because of Aimee and because she doesn’t have any money. Iris says that Richard told her Laura had gone insane and that she was saying she was pregnant. Laura explains that she was pregnant and that Richard and Winifred had her institutionalized in order to avoid scandal. Iris finds this plausible. Laura explains that she got an abortion at BellaVista. When Iris asks who the father was, Laura replies, “If you don’t already know, I don’t think I can tell you.” Iris assumes it was Alex and asks if Laura was in love with “him,” refusing to say his name. Confused, Laura says that she hated it but did it to save Alex.

Even more confused, Iris asks what Laura means. Laura explains that Callie knew where Alex was hiding and told Richard after he bailed her out of jail. Laura did her part to save Alex, but then he went to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Laura explains that this was why she’s meeting Iris now, because the war has ended and she’s expecting Alex to come home soon. Seeing Laura’s calm confidence, Iris suddenly feels consumed by anger and a desire to push Laura like when they were children. She tells Laura that Alex was killed six months ago in Holland, and Laura turns pale. Iris then reveals that Alex had listed her (Iris) as his next of kin because they’d been having an affair.

Without saying anything, Laura picks up Iris’s purse and leaves the restaurant. When Iris goes back to her car, she finds that it’s was gone—the car keys had been in the purse Laura took. Iris walks home, trying to think of what she would tell Richard and Winifred. Yet Richard isn’t home—he’s giving a speech at a club. Iris knows that Richard is running for office not to gain more money or power, but to gain respect. Iris bathes Aimee and reads to her, holding her until she fell asleep. She wonders where Laura is.

*In this passage, Avilion becomes a symbol not only for a better past that Iris and Laura were forced to leave behind, but also a symbol of Laura’s resistance to control. The fact that she hides in the attic is especially significant, as this was the site of her first major act of rebellion (sheltering Alex). Perhaps Laura needed to return to Avilion to remind herself that she could be take charge of her own fate despite other people’s efforts to control her.*



*This passage contains a highly important revelation, though it is possible the reader might miss it due to the fact that Iris herself fails to hear (or understand it) initially. Although the exact circumstances are still a little unclear at this point, it is clear that Laura had sex with someone (and got pregnant by him) because she believed it would help save Alex’s life. Laura’s hint that Iris should “already know” who the father is heavily implies that it was Richard who raped her, while her comment about saving Alex perhaps suggests that Richard blackmailed Laura into having sex with him by threatening Alex.*



*Some would argue that this is when Iris commits her most unforgiveable act: she cruelly reveals Alex’s death (and her own affair with him) to Laura after Laura admitted that she allowed herself to be raped by Richard in order to save his life. The fact that Iris is gripped by the same feeling she experienced when they were children shows how deeply sibling rivalry and other childhood dynamics can run. Yet it is debatable whether this provides any excuse for the utter cruelty of her behavior toward Laura.*



*The fact that Iris is able to go home after this and get on with her day in a relatively calm manner arguably further incriminates her. While she may be worried about Laura, she still pushes this worry to one side in order to maintain the appearance of going about her life normally.*



Iris experiences a strange blank in her mind, followed by a single word: escarpment. She doesn't know why this word is appearing to her now. The day after she sees Laura at Diana Street, Iris waits by the telephone, but no one calls. She goes to lunch with Winifred and two of "her committee members," where they discuss the cabaret Winifred is planning to raise money for injured soldiers. Winifred comments that Iris seemed weak, and Iris can't stop thinking about Laura. When she gets home, Mrs. Murgatroyd tells her that Laura had been there while she was gone.

Iris is relieved to hear this, but shortly after, a police officer comes to the house and informs her of Laura's death, explaining that the dead woman in Iris's car was initially believed to be Iris herself. Iris is left shaking. She realizes that she will still have to invent a story for Richard about why Laura had her car. She calls Richard and tells him that Laura is dead, explaining that she's about to go to the morgue. Richard advises Iris to have the body moved to somewhere more "private." When Iris mentions that the police are speculating Laura may have killed herself on purpose, Richard dismisses this as "nonsense." He tells Iris that if Laura left a suicide note, she should burn it.

Iris goes to get changed, and while pulling open her stocking drawer she finds a pile of notebooks labelled *Mathematics*, a subject Laura despised. At this point, Iris stops her own narration, saying that she could have chosen not to read the notebooks. However, humans are rarely able to resist the temptations of curiosity. As for those who leave behind "evidence" like this, they may have many reasons for doing it, including "egotism" or the desire for absolution or vengeance.

## CHAPTER 14

Iris feels that she has to hurry because she is nearing the end, which she characterizes as "a warm safe haven." Iris used to believe that she wanted justice and that her intentions were noble. However, people often think this before they commit harm. The notebooks of Laura's that Iris found are in her trunk, preserved in their original state. Each of the notebooks had the name of a different school subject on it. A blurb on the cover of **The Blind Assassin** claims that Laura writes like an angel, and Iris says that this is actually true: Laura wrote in a simple, straightforward way, tallying up sins.

*Iris is evidently concerned about Laura's wellbeing to some extent, yet the actions she takes to check if Laura is okay are entirely passive. There is a clear sense in which she has divested from the promise she made to actively take care of Laura.*



*While it is important to emphasize that Iris is certainly not responsible for Laura's suicide, it is also clear that she let her sister down in a major way. Crucially, this was a repeat of an earlier time when Iris let Laura down, something that Laura has explicitly brought up to her before: when the girls were children, Iris did not act on Laura's statement that Mr. Erskine was molesting her (and in fact didn't even believe her). Here, Iris appears to have done a similar thing by ignoring Laura's heavy-handed hints about Richard.*



*While the reader may have been starting to believe that it was Iris, not Laura, who wrote *The Blind Assassin*, the moment when Iris discovers Laura's notebook challenges this reinterpretation, suggesting that it perhaps was Laura who wrote it after all.*



*The idea of Laura as an angel provides an interesting framework through which to consider her role in the narrative. Laura certainly provides a moral compass within the novel and she does seem invested in assessing the sins of those around her. Moreover, she is marked as different from the other characters, never quite able to fit in, as if she truly is a different kind of being from them.*



Back in 1945, Iris opens Laura's Latin notebook first. Laura had ripped out most of the pages of her Latin homework, although there was one Virgil translation that Iris had helped her with. Iris remembers discussing Dido's suicide with Laura, although Iris herself hadn't been particularly interested in it. After looking at Latin, Iris opens Laura's history book. Nothing is inside except the photograph of Laura and Alex Thomas, with Iris cuts out. Geography is almost completely empty too, as is French, as Laura had ripped all her French writing out. All that's left is Alex's list of invented words that the girls had found in the attic, which Laura claimed to have burned.

Inside Mathematics, there is a list of dates, the first of which is the day Iris returned from her honeymoon in Europe. They last until Laura was taken to BellaVista. There are also words, which read: "Avilion, no. No. No. Sunnyside. No. Xanadu, no. No," and so on, until they change to, "Water Nixie, X. 'Besotted.' Toronto again. X." In this moment, Iris can't believe how "blind" she had been and how wrong she was to assume that Alex was the father of Laura's baby.

Iris puts the notebooks back in the drawer, thinking about how she now knows everything but has no real evidence to prove it. After Laura's funeral, Richard goes to Ottawa, hoping that on this trip he will officially be asked to run for office. With Richard gone, Iris packs up her and Aimee's belongings in her trunk. She leaves a letter for Richard saying that she knows what did done to Laura and that she never wants to speak to him again. She says she won't get an official divorce and she pretends to have evidence in the form of Laura's notebooks, which she threatens reveal if Richard tried to get custody of Aimee. She asks for enough money to buy a small house in Port Ticonderoga plus "maintenance" for Aimee.

Before leaving Toronto, Iris also goes to see Callie, who's working on a commission of three female factory workers that's to go on the wall of an insurance company. When confronted, Callie denies that she revealed Alex's whereabouts to Richard. She claims that she'd initially helped Alex but that he disappeared without paying back the money he owed her. Iris isn't sure if Richard had lied to Laura about Callie's knowledge of Alex's location or if Callie herself was lying, but ultimately it didn't matter much either way.

*This passage once again dispels the idea that it was Laura who wrote The Blind Assassin, as the notebooks she left behind do not contain the narrative of this novel. What they do contain, however, is further evidence of her fixation with Alex. The fact that she appears to have been in love with him makes Iris's revelation of their affair and Alex's death in the café even more awful.*



*The Mathematics notebook contains a record of the times when Richard raped Laura. The fact that Iris was unable to perceive or understand that this was taking place may or may not be an indictment of her, depending on the reader's perspective. After all, this truth is so disturbing that perhaps Iris can't be blamed for failing to imagine it.*



*While Iris may have spent much of the novel behaving in an indecisive, self-protective, and at times selfish manner, in this moment everything shifts. This demonstrates that she certainly had no idea what Richard was doing to Laura and that, despite the ways in which she failed Laura, she remains loyal to her sister. Indeed, she perhaps feels a greater need to protect Laura now in death than she really did in life.*



*This passage emphasizes that the novel is filled with deeply flawed individuals, all of whom have acted in imperfect ways. While Callie may be telling the truth, it seems more likely that she isn't. This information doesn't mean she is an evil person, but rather that she made a mistake as all humans are prone to do.*



Aimee is sad to be in Port Ticonderoga and she misses Richard. The town has changed and is adjusting to a new, peacetime way of life. Elwood Murray died in the war, as did Ron Hincks. Reenie is still working at Betty's, despite receiving Ron's pension and being in bad health. Six months after Iris moves back to town, Reenie dies of kidney failure. Addressing Myra again, Iris describes how heartbroken she was by this, although she did find that Reenie stayed present through the "commentary" that Iris could not help but hear inside her own head.

Iris finds that going to **Avilion** is painful. Having let herself in using Reenie's key, she looks around at the now dilapidated, dusty, and dirty environment. Iris finds the spot in the attic where Laura must have been living after running away from BellaVista. Richard doesn't come to Port Ticonderoga, instead sending Winifred on his behalf. Coldly, Iris asks Winifred if Richard believed he was getting "two for the price of one" when he married Iris. Winifred denies Iris's charges against him and demands that Iris let Richard see Aimee, but Iris refuses on the grounds of Richard's evident sexual interest in young girls. When Winifred gasps that Aimee is Richard's daughter, Iris almost reveals that she isn't, but instead Iris keeps quiet.

Iris manages to buy her small house, although Aimee continues to resent her for taking them away from their previous luxurious life. Separated from Richard, Aimee idealizes him. Iris and Richard don't get divorced, but rumors circulate that Iris is insane and that Richard is supporting her, which makes him look like a "saint." Before **The Blind Assassin** is published, Iris's life in Port Ticonderoga is peaceful enough. However, it's during this period that she begins to be troubled by her conscience and she finds it difficult to sleep.

Iris sends **The Blind Assassin** to the publisher; the author biography notes that Laura wrote it in her early twenties, before her death in a car "accident" in 1945. When the novel is first published, it receives some critical praise but not much attention. However, then "moralists" begin taking interest in it, and suddenly its popularity explodes. Richard's political rivals use it against him, and rumors circulate that Laura's supposedly accidental death was actually a suicide. More information emerges, including the detail of Laura's stay at BellaVista. Damning letters between Richard and Dr. Witherspoon are even published.

*Again, one of the motifs of the novel is the way that the dead have a continued presence in the lives of the living. While they may not be physically present, their perspective on a given situation lives on. Iris cannot help but think of the way Reenie or Laura would have reacted to a given situation because there is an extent to which she has internalized their subjectivity within her own.*



*Winifred's loyalty to Richard is one of the most disturbing elements of the novel. She certainly either knows he raped Laura or has deluded herself into refusing to believe it, but either way the truth is right in front of her and cannot be ignored. The fact that Winifred betrays Iris and Laura in this manner shows the horrifying extent to which women can perpetuate and collaborate in gender-based violence.*



*The fact that Aimee continues to idealize Richard highlights the problem of trying to protect children from the adult world. While on one level it is arguably better that Aimee doesn't know the truth that her father (or the man she believes to be her father) raped her aunt, at the same time not knowing this truth keeps her suspended in a fantasy that ultimately further harms her.*



*From a contemporary perspective, the extent of the scandal caused by a fictional story about a man and a married woman having an affair may be surprising. However, this was the reality of the social world of 1940s Canada, and it explains much of the behavior of the characters of the novel.*



The scandal puts an abrupt end to Richard's political ambitions. Richard calls Iris and berates her for ruining him, and Iris taunts him in reply, saying that while Richard was in love with Laura, she was having an affair with another man. Richard is furious, particularly because he realizes that the other man is the "pinko" from the picnic (Alex). Richard claims that he and Laura had consensual sex, but Iris replies that considering Richard was blackmailing Laura, it was actually rape. Shortly after this phone call, Richard goes missing and is found dead in the *Water Nixie* not long after. He actually dies in the boathouse, but Winifred makes it look like the boat was on the water so that it seems less like suicide.

After Richard's death, Winifred declares "open war" on Iris, which takes the form of a custody battle over Aimee. Iris switches to addressing Aimee directly, discussing the terrible things Winifred must have said about her, then she switches back to the narrative. Iris travels the country selling antiques and often sleeps with the men she's selling them to, giving fake names and staying at cheap motels. Winifred manages to get ahold of evidence of this, and she used it in court, which is how she wins custody of Aimee. As stipulated in Richard's will, Winifred also controls Aimee's trust fund.

Iris reveals that, as she has been hinting throughout the novel, she actually wrote **The Blind Assassin**—not Laura. She started writing it during the war, while she was waiting for Alex to return, and continued writing after she knew he was dead. Some might accuse her of being a coward for publishing it under Laura's name. Yet she also feels that this act bestowed a kind of justice to Laura, as in some way Laura was indeed her "collaborator." In a sense, neither of them was the "real author," as the story had a life of its own. Iris recalls Laura as a child being confused about who sat at God's left hand if Jesus sat at his right. She concludes that God must sit at a round table, so that "everyone sits at everyone else's right hand."

This could be a metaphor for how the sisters wrote the book together, with both and neither of them is its true author. While Iris didn't know who she was writing the book for when she started it, she now sees that it is for Sabrina, to give her the full truth that she needs. She realizes it might be a shock for Sabrina to learn that she is not biologically related to either Richard or Winifred. Because Sabrina's real father, Alex, was an orphan, much of Sabrina's heritage is a mystery. However, this means that she is "free to reinvent [her]self at will."

*The fact that The Blind Assassin drew attention to (some of) Richard's crimes and ruined his political career is one of the only instances in the novel in which justice is served. The fact that Richard ends up killing himself could be read as confirmation of this justice or as an evasion of it, as in death he escapes confronting the reality of his crimes.*



*The fact that Winifred won custody not only of Sabrina after Aimee's death, but also of Aimee years before that, highlights why the elderly Iris is so traumatized. The role of Winifred's control over Aimee's trust fund in securing her custody also shows the extent to which money can buy anything—even guardianship of a child.*



*Some might perceive Iris's decision to publish The Blind Assassin under Laura's name as an act of cowardice or else an unforgivable exploitation of her sister. After all, Laura did not (and could not) consent to having this material published under her name. At the same time, as the previous passages showed, publishing the novel was a way in which Iris was able to secure some justice for Laura and preserve a largely positive memorial of her in the public sphere.*



*One of the main messages of the concluding part of the novel is the power of narrative as a tool of justice. At the same time, the reader might question Iris's faith that her narrative does indeed contain the full truth. A case could be made that Iris version of the story is not the truth, but just one of many possible stories.*



## CHAPTER 15

In **The Blind Assassin**, the woman only has one photograph of the man: the photograph of the picnic. In it, she and the man are both smiling, and it looks almost as if the man is holding his hand out to protect her. The woman often looks at this image while she is alone. There is another hand in it, the hand of a figure who's been cut off. The woman wonders how she could have been "so ignorant" in the past, but she also knows this ignorance was necessary to survive. The photograph is happy, but the story it tells isn't. The story is one of "loss and regret and misery and yearning."

The *Port Ticonderoga Herald and Banner* features the obituary of Iris Chase Griffen, who died in May 1999 at the age of 83. Myra, who wrote the obituary, describes Iris as "a memorable lady" who died peacefully in her garden. It notes that Iris's one surviving family member, Sabrina, recently returned from India to sort through Iris's affairs, a task Myra will help with.

Sometime prior to this obituary, the elderly Iris sits on her back porch on a warm, wet spring day. She feels as if she is seeing the world completely clearly. Beside her is the manuscript that she's been writing, which she plans to leave inside her trunk, waiting for Sabrina to return and find it. She has a fantasy about Sabrina's return, imagining her arriving unexpectedly and knocking on Iris's door. Iris will think that Sabrina is the most beautiful person she's ever seen. Sabrina will address her as "Grandmother," ending the estrangement between them. Iris will make Sabrina cocoa and tell her the whole story of their family and how Sabrina came to exist. Iris won't ask Sabrina to love or forgive her—she only hopes that her granddaughter will listen.

*The end of the novel contains a very explicit, almost metafictional reflection on whether or not it is ultimately a happy story. The conclusion of The Blind Assassin is that it isn't—while there are moments of hope, love, and romance, it is largely a story of loss and tragedy, without any sense of redemption.*



*Despite how alone Iris may have felt in her death, the fact that Myra wrote this loving obituary shows that she was not quite as isolated as she felt. The return of Sabrina, meanwhile, is more ambiguous—it is unclear if she wants to be there out of love for Iris or not.*



*This ending is heartbreakingly bittersweet. Although it suggests that Iris was comforted by the hope and fantasy of Sabrina returning, the reader also knows that this did not happen before Iris's death. Iris ultimately died without the resolution of knowing that her only living family member was ready to listen to her story.*





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