

The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood

This is the opening chapter to the novel, narrated by Iris Chase, wife Of Richard Griffen. Iris has just been informed that her sister has been killed in a car accident and suspected suicide.

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

"I'm afraid there will be an inquest, Mrs. Griffen," he said. "Naturally," I said. "But it was an accident. My sister was never a good driver."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Question 4:

Focus this part of your answer on the second part of the source **from line 20 to the end**.

A student, having read this section of the text, said: *“This part of the text presents the narrator, Iris Chase, as a careful and deliberate woman but also as someone who is devastated and all alone.”*

To what extent do you agree?

In your response, you could:

- consider your own impressions of Iris Chase, how she behaves and what she remembers
- evaluate how the writer creates these impressions of Iris Chase
- support your opinions with references to the text.