

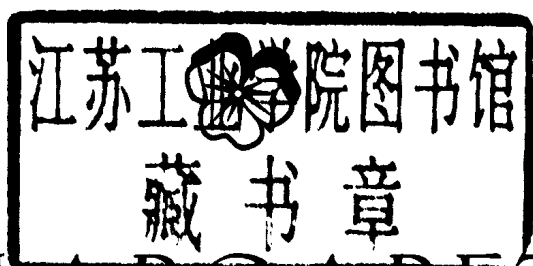
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BODILY HARM

By the Booker Prize-Winning Author of
THE BLIND ASSASSIN



BODILY HARM



MARGARET
ATWOOD



ANCHOR BOOKS
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A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her.

John Berger
Ways of Seeing

I





This is how I got here, says Rennie.

It was the day after Jake left. I walked back to the house around five. I'd been over at the market and I was carrying the shopping basket as well as my purse. There wasn't as much to carry now that Jake wasn't there any more, which was just as well because the muscles in my left shoulder were aching, I hadn't been keeping up the exercises. The trees along the street had turned and the leaves were falling onto the sidewalk, yellow and brown, and I was thinking, Well, it's not so bad, I'm still alive.

My next-door neighbour, an old Chinese man whose name I didn't know, was tidying up his front yard. The yard in front of my house had been covered over with paving stones so you could park a car on it. That meant the street was going up rather than down, and in a few years I'd have to move; though I'd stopped thinking in years. My neighbour had pulled up the dead plants and was raking the earth into a raised oblong. In the spring he'd plant things I didn't know the names for. I remember thinking it was time I learned the names, if I was going to live there.

I did notice the cruiser, which they'd left beside a meter like any other car, no flashing lights, but it was a few doors

away so I didn't pay much attention to it. You see more police cars down there than you might farther north.

The front door was open, which wasn't out of place on such a warm day. The downstairs neighbour, an old woman who isn't the landlady but behaves like one, has cats and likes to leave the outside door ajar so they can get in and go through the cat door. "Cat hole," Jake calls it; used to call it.

My own door at the top of the stairs was open too. There were people inside, men, I could hear them talking, and then a laugh. I couldn't think who it could be, it wasn't Jake, but whoever it was didn't seem to care who knew they were there. The key was under the mat where I always leave it, but the edge of the doorframe was splintered, the lock was shoved right out of it. I went into the livingroom, which was still piled with the boxes of books Jake had packed but not collected. Nothing had been moved. Through the kitchen doorway I could see feet and legs, shining feet, pressed legs.

Two policemen were sitting at the table. I had that quick rush of fear, late for school, caught on the boys' stairs, caught out. The only thing I could think of was that they were after the pot, but there were no drawers pulled open and the tea and coffee canisters were where they should be. Then I remembered that Jake had taken the whole stash with him. Why not? It was his. Anyway, surely they'd stopped worrying about that, everyone does it now, even the police, it's almost legal.

The younger one stood up, the older one didn't. He stayed sitting down, smiling up at me as if I'd come for a job interview.

You Miss Wilford? he asked. He didn't wait. You're damn lucky. He had a massive head, with the hair clipped short like a punker's. His was left over though, from sometime in the fifties: no green highlights.

Why? I said. What's the matter?

You've got good neighbours, the younger one said. He looked like a high-school gym teacher or a Baptist, about

twenty-two, earnest and severe. The one downstairs. She was the one who phoned.

Was it a fire? I said. There was no sign of it, no smell.

The older one laughed. The other one didn't. No, he said. She heard footsteps up here and she knew it wasn't you, she saw you go out, and she didn't hear anyone go up the stairs. He jimmied open your kitchen window.

I put the shopping basket on the table; then I went and looked at the window, which was open about two feet. The white paint was scratched.

You could do it with a jackknife, he said. You should get those safety locks. He heard us coming and went back out through the window.

Did he take anything? I said.

You'll have to tell us that, said the older one.

The young one looked uneasy. We don't think he was a burglar, he said. He made himself a cup of Ovaltine. He was just waiting for you, I guess. There was a cup on the table, half full of something light brown. I felt sick: someone I didn't know had been in my kitchen, opening my refrigerator and my cupboards, humming to himself maybe, as if he lived there; as if he was an intimate.

What for? I said.

The older one stood up. He took up a lot of space in the kitchen. Take a look, he said, pleased with himself, in charge. He had a present he'd been saving up. He walked past me into the livingroom and then into the bedroom. I was glad I'd made the bed that morning: lately I hadn't always.

There was a length of rope coiled neatly on the quilt. It wasn't any special kind of rope, there was nothing lurid about it. It was off-white and medium thick. It could have been a clothesline.

All I could think of was a game we used to play, Detective or Clue, something like that. You had to guess three things: Mr. Green, in the conservatory, with a pipewrench; Miss Plum, in the kitchen, with a knife. Only I couldn't re-

member whether the name in the envelope was supposed to be the murderer's or the victim's. *Miss Wilford, in the bedroom, with a rope.*

He was just waiting for you, the younger one said behind me.

Drinking his Ovaltine, the big one said. He smiled down at me, watching my face, almost delighted, like an adult who's just said *I told you so* to some rash child with a skinned knee.

So you were lucky, the younger one said. He came past me and picked up the rope, carefully, as if it had germs. I could see now that he was older than I'd thought, he had anxious puckers around the eyes.

The big one opened the closet door, casually, as if he had every right. Two of Jake's suits were still hanging there.

You live alone, that right? the big one said.

I said yes.

These your pictures? said the big one, grinning.

No, I said. They belong to a friend of mine. The pictures were Jake's, he was supposed to take them away.

Quite a friend, said the big one.

He must've been watching you for a while, said the young one. He must've known when you'd get home. Any idea who it might be?

No, I said. I wanted to sit down. I thought of asking them if they wanted a beer.

Some nut, the big one said. If you knew what was walking around loose out there you'd never go out. You close the curtains in the bathroom when you take a shower?

There aren't any curtains in the bathroom, I said. There aren't any windows.

You close the curtains when you get dressed at night?

Yes, I said.

He'll be back, the young one said. That kind always comes back.

The big one wouldn't let up. You have men over here a lot? Different men?

He wanted it to be my fault, just a little, some indiscretion, some provocation. Next he would start lecturing me about locks, about living alone, about safety.

I close the curtains, I said. I don't have men over. I turn out the lights. I get undressed by myself, in the dark.

The big one smirked at me, he knew about single women, and suddenly I was angry. I unbuttoned my blouse and pulled my left arm out of the sleeve and dropped the slip strap over my shoulder.

What in hell are you doing? the big one said.

I want you to believe me, I said.

There's a two-hour stopover in Barbados, or so they tell her. Rennie finds the women's washroom in the new Muzak-slick airport and changes from her heavy clothes to a cotton dress. She examines her face in the mirror, checking for signs. In fact she looks quite well, she looks normal. Her dress is a washed-out blue, her face isn't too pale, she wears only enough makeup so she won't seem peculiar, a leftover hippie or a Plymouth Brethren or something like that. This is the effect she aims for, neutrality; she needs it for her work, as she used to tell Jake. Invisibility.

Take a chance, said Jake, during one of his campaigns to alter her, what was it that time? Purple satin with rhinestone spaghetti straps. Make a statement.

Other people make statements, she said. I just write them down.

That's a cop-out, said Jake. If you've got it, flaunt it.

Which God knows you do, said Rennie.

You're putting me down again, said Jake, affable, showing his teeth, flawless except for the long canines.

You're impossible to put down, said Rennie. That's why I love you.

In the washroom there's a blow-dryer for your hands,

which claims to be a protection against disease. The instructions are in French as well as English, it's made in Canada. Rennie washes her hands and dries them under the blow-dryer. She's all in favour of protection against disease.

She thinks about what's behind her, what she cancelled or didn't bother to cancel. As for the apartment, she just shut the door with its shiny new lock and walked out, since out was where she needed to be. It gets easier and easier, dishes in the sink for two weeks, three weeks, only a little mould on them, she hardly even feels guilty any more; one of these days it may be permanent.

Rennie's lucky that she can manage these sidesteps, these small absences from real life; most people can't. She's not tied down, which is an advantage. It's a good thing she's versatile, and it helps to know people, in this case Keith. Keith has recently come across to *Visor* from *Toronto Life*. He's a contact of hers, which is not the same as a friend. While she was in the hospital she decided that most of her friends were really just contacts.

I want to go somewhere warm and very far away, she said.

Try the Courtyard Café, he said.

No, seriously, said Rennie. My life is the pits right now. I need a tan.

Want to do The Restless Caribbean? he said. So does everyone else.

Nothing political, she said. I can do you a good Fun in the Sun, with the wine lists and the tennis courts, I know what you like.

You finked out on the last piece I wanted you to do, said Keith. Anyway, you just came back from Mexico.

That was last year, she said. Come on, we're old buddies. I need some time out.

Keith sighed and then agreed, a little too quickly. Usually he haggled more. He must have heard about the operation;

maybe he even knew about Jake leaving. He had that faint sick look in his eyes, as if he wanted to give her something, charity for instance. Rennie hates charity.

It's not a total freebie, she said. It's not as if I don't produce.

Pick an island, he said. Only it has to be someplace we haven't done. How about this one? A friend of mine went there, sort of by mistake. He says it's off the beaten track.

Rennie had never heard of it. Sounds great, she said. Ordinarily she would have done some homework, but she was in too much of a hurry. This time she's flying blind.

Rennie repacks her bag, stuffing her pantyhose into an outside pocket, the one with the clock. Then she goes to the restaurant, where everything is wicker, and orders a gin and tonic. She does not look long at the distant sea, which is too blue to be believable.

The restaurant isn't full. There are a few women alone and more in clutches, and a couple of families. There are no men by themselves. Men by themselves usually go to the bar. She knows, she's learned since Jake left, that if she spends much time gazing around the room with that slightly defiant stare adopted by women alone to indicate that they don't have to be, one of the other solitaires might join her. So instead she watches her hands and the ice cubes in her glass, which despite the air conditioning are melting almost at once.

When she goes to the gate she's told the plane is late. Lugging her bag and her camera bag, she walks among the kiosk shops: small black hand-sewn dolls, cigarette boxes and mirrors encrusted with shells, necklaces made from the teeth of sharks, porcupine fish, inflated and dried. A miniature five-piece steel band, mounted on a slab of driftwood, in which the players are toads. Looking more closely, she sees that the toads are real ones that have been stuffed and varnished. A long time ago she would have bought this monstrosity and sent it to someone for a joke.

• • •

Rennie is from Griswold, Ontario. Griswold is what they call her background. Though it's less like a background, a backdrop—picturesque red Victorian houses and autumn trees on a hillside in the distance—than a subground, something that can't be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; nothing you'd want to go into. Those who'd lately been clamouring for roots had never seen a root up close, Rennie used to say. She had, and she'd rather be some other part of the plant.

In an earlier phase, Rennie used to tell jokes about Griswold to amuse her friends. Such as: How many people from Griswold does it take to change a lightbulb? The whole town. One to change it, ten to snoop, and the rest of them to discuss how sinful you are for wanting more light. Or: How many people from Griswold does it take to change a lightbulb? None. If the light goes out it's the will of God, and who are you to complain?

People from bigger places, Jake in particular, think that Griswold has an exotic and primitive charm. Rennie doesn't think this. Mostly she tries to avoid thinking about Griswold at all. Griswold, she hopes, is merely something she defines herself against.

Though it's not always so easy to get rid of Griswold. For instance: When Rennie saw the piece of rope on her bed, she knew what Griswold would have had to say about it. This is what happens to women like you. What can you expect, you deserve it. In Griswold everyone gets what they deserve. In Griswold everyone deserves the worst.

The night before the operation Jake took Rennie out to dinner, to cheer her up. She didn't feel like going, but she knew she had been boring recently and she'd vowed, a long time ago, when she was still in her early twenties, never to be boring; a vow that had been harder to keep than she'd expected.

Rennie was an expert on boredom, having done a piece on it for *Pandora's* "Relationships" column in which she claimed that there were two people involved in boredom, not just one: the borer and the boree. Out-and-out boredom of the jaw-stiffening kind could be avoided by small shifts in attention. *Study his tie*, she recommended. *If you're stuck, make an imaginary earlobe collection and add his. Watch his Adam's apple move up and down. Keep smiling.* The assumption was that the active principle, the source of the powerful ergs of boredom, was male, and that the passive recipient was female. Of course this was unfair, but who except women would read a *Pandora* "Relationships" column? When writing for male-oriented magazines such as *Crusoe* or *Visor* she offered self-help hints: "How To Read Her Mind." *If she's looking too hard at your earlobes or watching your Adam's apple go up and down, change the subject.*

Jake took her to Fentons, which used to be more than he could afford, and they sat under one of the indoor trees. At first he held her hand, but she felt he was doing it because he thought he ought to and after a while he stopped. He ordered a bottle of wine and urged her to drink more of it than she wanted to. Perhaps he thought she would be less boring if she got drunk, but this was not the case.

She didn't want to talk about the operation but she couldn't think about anything else. Maybe it would turn out to be benign; on the other hand, maybe they would open her up and find that she was permeated, riddled, rotting away from the inside. There was a good chance she'd wake up minus a breast. She knew she ought to be thinking about how to die with dignity but she didn't want to die with dignity. She didn't want to die at all.

Jake told stories about people they knew, gossip stories with a malicious twist, the kind she used to enjoy. She tried to enjoy them but instead she started to think about Jake's fingers: he was holding the stem of his wineglass with his left hand, lightly, but the knuckles were absolutely white. He had a habit of never throwing out empty containers; that morning

she'd taken down the Shreddies box and there was nothing in it. How could she know when it was time to get more if he kept leaving empty peanut butter jars and honey jars and cocoa tins on the shelves? She refrained from mentioning this. She felt that Jake's eyes kept slipping away from her face, down to the top button of her blouse; then, as if he'd reached a line, a taboo, back up to her face again. He's fascinated, she thought.

They walked home with their arms around each other, as if they were still in love. While Jake took a shower, Rennie stood in the bedroom with the closet door open, wondering what she should put on. Two of her nightgowns, the black one with the see-through lace top and the red satin one slit up the sides, had been presents from Jake. He liked buying her things like that. Bad taste. Garters, merry widows, red bikini pants with gold spangles, wired half-cup hooker brassieres that squeezed and pushed up the breasts. The real you, he'd say, with irony and hope. Who'd ever guess? Black leather and whips, that's next.

She wanted to make it easy for him, she wanted to help him along with the illusion that nothing bad had happened to her or was going to happen. Her body was in the mirror, looking the same as ever. She couldn't believe that in a week, a day, some of it might have vanished. She thought about what they did with the parts.

In the end she wore nothing. She waited in bed for Jake to come out of the shower. He would smell of body shampoo and he would be damp and slippery. She used to like it when he slid into her wet like that, but tonight she was only waiting for a certain amount of time to be over, as if she were in a dentist's office, waiting for something to be done to her. A procedure..

At first he couldn't. It had been too sudden; she'd been told, she'd told him, the operation had been scheduled, all in the same day. She could understand his shock and disgust and