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Knife

MEDITATIONS AFTER AN ATTEMPTED MURDER

Salman Rushdie



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LONDON

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PART ONE

The Angel of Death

Knife

At a quarter to eleven on August 12, 2022, on a sunny Friday morning in upstate New York, I was attacked and almost killed by a young man with a knife just after I came out on stage at the amphitheater in Chautauqua to talk about the importance of keeping writers safe from harm.

I was with Henry Reese, co-creator, along with his wife, Diane Samuels, of the City of Asylum Pittsburgh project, which offers refuge to a number of writers whose safety is at risk in their own countries. This was the story Henry and I were at Chautauqua to tell: the creation in America of safe spaces for writers from elsewhere, and my involvement in that project's beginnings. It was scheduled as part of a week of events at the Chautauqua Institution titled "More Than Shelter: Redefining the American Home."

We never had that conversation. As I was about to discover, on that day the amphitheater was not a safe space for me.

I can still see the moment in slow motion. My eyes follow the

running man as he leaps out of the audience and approaches me, I see each step of his headlong run. I watch myself coming to my feet and turning toward him. (I continue to face him. I never turn my back on him. There are no injuries on my back.) I raise my left hand in self-defense. He plunges the knife into it.

After that there are many blows, to my neck, to my chest, to my eye, everywhere. I feel my legs give way, and I fall.

Thursday, August 11, had been my last innocent evening. Henry, Diane, and I had strolled without a care through the grounds of the Institution and had a pleasant dinner at 2 Ames, a restaurant on the corner of the green park area called Bestor Plaza. We reminisced about the talk I'd given eighteen years earlier in Pittsburgh about my part in creating the International Cities of Refuge Network. Henry and Diane were at the talk and were inspired to make Pittsburgh an asylum city, too. They began by funding one small house and sponsoring a Chinese poet, Huang Xiang, who strikingly covered the exterior walls of his new home with a poem in large white-painted Chinese letters. Gradually, Henry and Diane expanded the project until they had a whole street of asylum houses, Sampsonia Way, on the city's North Side. I was happy to be in Chautauqua to celebrate their achievement.

What I didn't know was that my would-be killer was already present on the grounds of the Chautauqua Institution. He had entered using a false ID, his fake name constructed out of the real names of well-known Shia Muslim extremists, and even as we walked to dinner and back again to the guesthouse where we were staying, he, too, was there somewhere, he had been there for a couple of nights, wandering around, sleeping rough, checking out the site of his intended attack, making his plan, unno-

ticed by any surveillance camera or security guard. We could have run into him at any moment.

I do not want to use his name in this account. My Assailant, my would-be Assassin, the Asinine man who made Assumptions about me, and with whom I had a near-lethal Assignment . . . I have found myself thinking of him, perhaps forgivably, as an Ass. However, for the purposes of this text, I will refer to him more decorously as “the A.” What I call him in the privacy of my home is my business.

This “A.” didn’t bother to inform himself about the man he had decided to kill. By his own admission, he read barely two pages of my writing and watched a couple of YouTube videos of me, and that was all he needed. From this we can deduce that, whatever the attack was about, it wasn’t about *The Satanic Verses*.

I will try to understand what it was about in this book.

On the morning of August 12, we had an early breakfast with the event’s sponsors on the sunny outdoor terrace of the Institution’s grand Athenaeum Hotel. I don’t like a big breakfast, and limited myself to coffee and a croissant. I met the Haitian poet Sony Ton-Aime, Chautauqua’s Michael I. Rudell Director of Literary Arts, who was going to introduce us. There was some bookish small talk about the evils or virtues of ordering or not ordering new titles from Amazon. (I confessed that I sometimes did.) Then we walked through the hotel lobby and across a small piazza into the backstage area of the amphitheater, where Henry introduced me to his nonagenarian mother, which was nice.

Just before we went out on stage, I was handed an envelope containing a check—my speaking fee. I put it in the inside

pocket of my jacket, and then it was showtime. Sony, Henry, and I walked out onto the stage.

The amphitheater seats over four thousand people. It wasn't full, but there was a big crowd. We were briefly introduced by Sony, speaking from a podium at stage left. I was seated at stage right. The audience applauded generously. I remember raising a hand to acknowledge the applause. Then, in the corner of my right eye—the last thing my right eye would ever see—I saw the man in black running toward me down the right-hand side of the seating area. Black clothes, black face mask. He was coming in hard and low: a squat missile. I got to my feet and watched him come. I didn't try to run. I was transfixed.

It had been thirty-three and a half years since the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's notorious death order against me and all those involved in the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, and during those years, I confess, I had sometimes imagined my assassin rising up in some public forum or other and coming for me in just this way. So my first thought when I saw this murderous shape rushing toward me was: *So it's you. Here you are.* It is said that Henry James's last words were "So it has come at last, the distinguished thing." Death was coming at me, too, but it didn't strike me as distinguished. It struck me as anachronistic.

This was my second thought: *Why now? Really? It's been so long. Why now, after all these years?* Surely the world had moved on, and that subject was closed. Yet here, approaching fast, was a sort of time traveler, a murderous ghost from the past.

There was no visible security in the amphitheater that morning—why not? I don't know—so he had a clear run at me. I was just standing there, staring toward him, rooted to the spot like a rabbit-in-the-headlights fool.

Then he reached me.

I never saw the knife, or at least I have no memory of it. I don't know if it was long or short, a broad bowie blade or narrow like a stiletto, bread-knife-serrated or crescent-curved or a street kid's flick knife, or even a common carving knife stolen from his mother's kitchen. I don't care. It was serviceable enough, that invisible weapon, and it did its work.

Two nights before I flew to Chautauqua, I had a dream about being attacked by a man with a spear, a gladiator in a Roman amphitheater. There was an audience, roaring for blood. I was rolling about on the ground trying to elude the gladiator's downward thrusts, and screaming. It was not the first time I had had such a dream. On two earlier occasions, as my dream-self rolled frantically around, my actual, sleeping self, also screaming, threw its body—my body—out of bed, and I awoke as I crashed painfully to the bedroom floor.

This time I didn't fall out of bed. My wife, Eliza—the novelist, poet, and photographer Rachel Eliza Griffiths—woke me up just in time. I sat up in bed, shaken by the dream's vividness and violence. It felt like a premonition (even though premonitions are things in which I don't believe). After all, the Chautauqua venue at which I was booked to speak was an amphitheater too.

"I don't want to go," I told Eliza. But people were depending on me—Henry Reese was depending on me, the event had been advertised for some time, tickets had been sold—and I was to be paid generously for showing up. As it happened, we had some big domestic bills to pay; our home's whole air-conditioning system was old, on the edge of breaking down, and needed to be renewed, so the money would be very handy. "I'd better go," I said.

Chautauqua, the town, is named after Lake Chautauqua, on whose shore it stands. “Chautauqua” is a word in the Erie language spoken by the Erie people, but both the people and the language are extinct, so the word’s meaning is unclear. It may mean “two moccasins” or it may mean “a bag tied in the middle” or it may mean something else entirely. It may be a description of the shape of the lake, or it may not. There are things that are lost in the past, where we all end up, most of us forgotten.

I first came across the word in 1974, around the time that I finished my first novel. It was in the cult-sensation book of that year, Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I don’t now remember much about ZAMM, as it was known—I don’t really care about motorcycles or Zen Buddhism either—but I remember liking the strange word, and liking, too, the notion of the meetings, “Chautauquas,” at which ideas were debated in an atmosphere of tolerance, openness, and freedom. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the “Chautauqua movement” spread across America from the lakeside town, and Theodore Roosevelt called it “the most American thing in America.”

I had spoken at Chautauqua once before, almost exactly twelve years earlier, in August 2010. I well remembered the cozy, cloistered atmosphere of the Chautauqua Institution, the neat, clean, tree-lined streets around the amphitheater. (But, to my surprise, this was a different amphitheater. The old one had been demolished and rebuilt in 2017.) Within the walls of the Institution, silver-haired liberal-minded folks gathered in an idyllic community and lived in comfortable wooden homes where it didn’t feel necessary to lock the doors. To spend time there felt like a step backward in time, into an earlier, innocent world that may only have existed in dreams.

On that last innocent night, the night of August 11, I stood

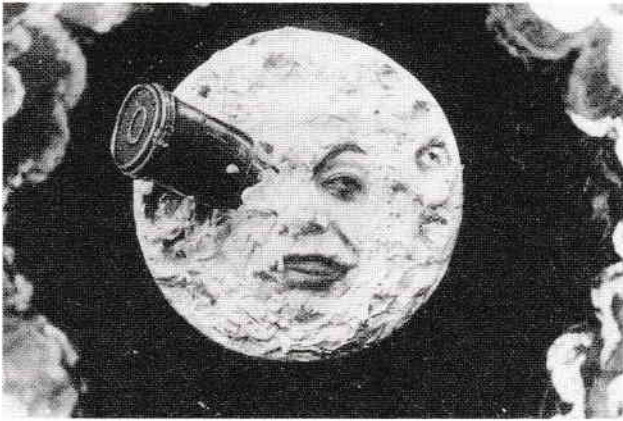
alone outside the guesthouse and looked at the full moon brightly shining down on the lake. Alone, wrapped in the night, just the moon and I together. In my novel *Victory City* the first kings of the Bisnaga Empire in South India claim descent from the Moon God, associating themselves with the “Lunar Lineage,” whose members included Lord Krishna and the mighty Achilles-like warrior Arjuna of the *Mahabharata*. I liked the idea that, instead of mere Earthlings going up to the moon in a ship oddly named after the Greek sun god Apollo, lunar deities had descended from the satellite to Earth. I stood there in the moonlight for a while and let my mind run on moon-stuff. I thought about the apocryphal story of Neil Armstrong setting foot on the moon and muttering, “Good luck, Mr. Gorsky,” because as a young boy in Ohio he had heard his neighbors the Gorskys quarreling over Mr. G.’s desire for a blowjob. “When the boy next door walks on the moon, that’s when you’ll get that,” Mrs. Gorsky replied. Sadly, the story was not true, but my friend Allegra Huston had made a funny film about it.

And I thought about “The Distance of the Moon,” Italo Calvino’s story in *Cosmicomics* about a time when the moon was much closer to the Earth than it is now and lovers could leap up to it for romantic moon-trysts.

And I thought about Tex Avery’s cartoon *Billy Boy*, about the little goat that ate the moon.

This is the free-associative way in which my mind works.

Eventually, I also remembered Georges Méliès’s fourteen-minute silent film *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, the early-cinema classic from 1902 about the first men to reach the moon, traveling in a bullet-shaped capsule fired from an immensely long cannon, wearing top hats and frock coats, and carrying umbrellas. This is the most famous moment from that film—the moon landing:



I had no idea, as I remembered the image of the spaceship wounding the moon's right eye, of what the next morning had in store for my own right eye.

I'm looking back at that happy man, myself, as he stands there soaked in summer moonlight on that Thursday night in August. He's happy because the scene is beautiful; and because he's in love; and because his novel is finished—he only just did the very last thing, correcting the galleys—and its first readers are excited by it. His life feels good. But we know what he doesn't know. We know that the happy man by the lake is in mortal danger. He has no idea, which makes our fear for him even greater.

This is the literary device known as foreshadowing. One of the most celebrated examples of it is the famous beginning of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad . . ." When we as readers know what the character can't know, we want to warn them. *Run, Anne Frank, they will discover your hiding place tomorrow*. As I think about that last carefree night, the shadow of the future falls across my memory. But I can't warn myself. Too late for that. I can only tell the story.

Here's a man alone in the dark, ignorant of the danger that's already very close.

Here's a man going to bed. In the morning his life will change. He knows nothing, the poor innocent. He's asleep.

The future rushes at him while he sleeps.

Except, strangely, it's really the past returning, my own past rushing at me, not a dream gladiator but a masked man with a knife, seeking to carry out a death order from three decades ago. In death we are all yesterday's people, trapped forever in the past tense. That was the cage into which the knife wanted to put me.

Not the future. The revenant past, seeking to drag me back in time.

Why didn't I fight? Why didn't I run? I just stood there like a piñata and let him smash me. Am I so feeble that I couldn't make the slightest attempt to defend myself? Was I so fatalistic that I was prepared simply to surrender to my murderer?

Why didn't I act? Others, family and friends, have tried to answer the question for me. "You were seventy-five years old at the time. He was twenty-four. You couldn't have fought him." "You were probably in shock even before he reached you." "What were you supposed to do? He could run faster than you, and you weren't armed." And, repeatedly, "Where the hell was the security?"

I don't really know what to think or how to reply. On some days I'm embarrassed, even ashamed, by my failure to try to fight back. On other days I tell myself not to be stupid, what do I imagine I could have done?

This is as close to understanding my inaction as I've been able to get: the targets of violence experience a crisis in their understanding of the real. Children going to school, a congregation in a synagogue, shoppers in a supermarket, a man on the stage of