

PICADOR

# BURIAL RITES

HANNAH KENT



esampler\*

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## PICADOR

Dear Bookseller,

Back in July, you might have heard the talk going around the industry about a novel called *Burial Rites*, set in 1829 in Iceland, by a young Australian woman, Hannah Kent. Based on a true story, *Burial Rites* explores the case of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last Icelandic woman to be sentenced to death for her part in a double murder.

Hannah was first inspired to write about Agnes while on a Rotary Exchange to Iceland a decade ago. And then last year, this talented 27-year-old won the inaugural Writing Australia Award for the manuscript – a prize that included a mentorship with Geraldine Brooks. Fast forward to June, 2012, and in the space of a week, *Burial Rites* spread around the world like wildfire.

It was a surreal time, and not just for the author! I found it extremely nerve-racking, beyond the usual cut and thrust of the acquisition process. You see, I was obsessed. We're all in this industry because we love books, but this was different. I'd fallen into *Burial Rites* and couldn't find my way out. Such is the power of Hannah Kent's ability to conjure the Arctic landscape and impoverished conditions of 1829 Iceland, and breathe life into the players at the centre of this notorious case. In Agnes, Hannah has channelled a character destined to join the ranks of literary fiction's most memorable heroines: fierce, intelligent, and daring to live on her own terms, Agnes is a woman trapped in her times, and doomed because of it.

Working on Hannah's novel is a joy. Beautiful and brutal, *Burial Rites* is an extraordinary achievement, and I'm thrilled to be able to share a sample of it here. I hope you love it as much as I do. Proofs will be available early next year, and Picador will publish the novel in May, 2013.

All best,

Alex Craig  
Picador Publisher

## SYNOPSIS

In northern Iceland, 1829, Agnes Magnúsdóttir is condemned to death for her part in the brutal murder of two men.

Agnes is sent to wait out the months leading up to her execution on the farm of district officer Jón Jónsson, his wife and their two daughters. Horrified to have a convicted murderess in their midst, the family avoid contact with Agnes. Only Tóti, the young assistant priest appointed her spiritual guardian, will listen to Agnes's side of the story. As the year progresses and the hardships of rural life force everyone to work side by side, the family's attitude to Agnes starts to change, until one winter night, she begins her whispered confession to them, and they realise that all is not as they had assumed.

Based on a true story, *Burial Rites* is an astonishing and moving novel about the truths we claim to know and the ways in which we interpret what we're told. In beautiful, cut-glass prose, Hannah Kent portrays Iceland's formidable landscape, in which every day is a battle for survival, and asks, how can one woman hope to endure when her life depends upon the stories told by others?

## CHAPTER TWO

We are riding and the sun has broken through the clouds. The men seem tired, silent; their heads are swaddled in their thoughts. Where are they taking me? They stopped telling me things like this long ago. Instead, they set me in iron cuffs and lead me around, and like a cow I go where I am led, and there's no kicking or it's the knife. It's the rope and a grim end. I put my head down, go where they take me and hope it's not to the grave, not yet. I am just glad it is away from Vatnsnes.

The flies are bad. They crawl on my face and into my eyes, and I feel the tiny ticking of their legs and wings. It's the sweat that draws them. These irons are too heavy to swat them away. They were built for a man, although they screw tight enough against my skin.

It is a relief to have movement, to have the warmth of a horse under my legs: to feel the life in something and to not be so cold. I've been half-frozen for so long, it is as though the winter has set up home in my marrow. Those endless days of dark indoors and hateful glances were enough to set a rime on anyone's bones. So yes, it's better to be outside now. Even with the air full of flies it's better to be going somewhere than rotting slowly in a room like a body in a coffin.

Beyond the hum of insects and the rhythm of the horses at their walk, I hear a distant roar. Maybe it's the ocean – the constant thundering of waves hitting the sands of Thingeyrar. Or perhaps I am imagining it. The sea gets into your head. Like Natan used to say, once you let it in, it doesn't leave you alone. Like a woman, he said. The sea is a nag.

It was that first spring at Illugastadir. The light had arrived like a hunted thing, all wide-eyed and trembling. The sea was blank – Natan pushed the boat along its silvered skin, plunged his oars in its side.

'As quiet as a churchyard,' he had said, smiling, his arms heaving with the pull of water. I heard the creak of wood and the whispered cuss of the oars slapping the surface of the sea. 'Be good when I'm gone.'

Don't think of him.

How long have we been riding? An hour? Two? Time's as slippery as oil. But it can't have been more than two hours. I know these parts. I know we are now heading south, perhaps towards Vatnsdalur. Strange, how my heart grips to my ribs in an instant. How long has it been since I last saw this part of the country? A few years? More? Nothing has changed.

This is as close to home as I'll ever be now.

We are passing through the strange hills at the mouth of the valley and I hear the caw of ravens. Their dark shapes look like omens against the brilliant blue of the sky. All those nights at Stóra-Borg, in that dark, miserable bed, I imagined I was outside, feeding the ravens at Flaga. Cruel birds, ravens, but wise. And creatures should be loved for their wisdom if they cannot be loved for kindness. As a child, I watched the ravens gather on the roof of Undirfell church, hoping to learn who was going to die. I sat on the wall, waiting for one to shake out his feathers, waiting to see which direction his beak turned. It happened once. A raven settled upon the wooden gable and jerked his beak towards Bakki, and a little boy drowned that week, found swollen and grey downriver. The raven had known.

Sigga was unschooled in nightmares and ghosts. One night, knitting together at Illugastadir, we heard a raven's shriek coming from the sea that chilled us to the core. I told her never to call out, nor feed a raven at night. Birds heard cawing in the dark are spirits, I said, and they would soon as murder you as look at you. I scared her, I'm sure, or she wouldn't have said the things she said later.

I wonder where Sigga might be now. Why they refused to keep her with me at Stóra-Borg. They took her away one morning when I was in irons, not telling me where she was held, although I asked more than once. 'Away from you', they said, 'and that is enough.'

'Agnes Magnúsdóttir!'

The man riding beside me has a hard look on his face.

'Agnes Magnúsdóttir. I'm to inform you that you're to be held at Kornsó, until the time of your execution.' He is reading something. His eyes flicker down to his gloves. 'As a criminal condemned by the court of this land, you have forfeited the right to freedom.' He folds the piece of paper and slips it in his glove. 'You'd do well to wipe that scowl off your face. They're gentle people at Kornsó.'

Here, man. Here is your smile. Is it a good one? Do you see my lips crack? Do you see my teeth?

He passes my mare, and the back of his shirt is damp with sweat. Have they done it on purpose? Kornsó, of all places.

I want to howl.

Yesterday, when I was in the dark room of Stóra-Borg, Kornsó would have seemed a heaven. A place of childhood, the river, the bright grass, the hillocks of turf oozing water in spring. But I see now that it will be a humiliation. People will know me in the valley. They will remember me as I was – as a baby, as a child, as a woman running from farm to farm – and then they will think of the murders and that child, that woman will be forgotten. I can't bear to look about me. I gaze at the horse's mane, at the lice crawling about the hair, and I don't know if they are from the mare or from me.



Reverend Tóti stooped in the low doorway and squinted against the rosy hue of the midnight sun. At the lower end of the farm's northernmost field he could see a trail of horses approaching. He searched for the woman among the riders. Against the golden flood of hay that surrounded them, the figures seemed small and dark.

Margrét stepped out of the door and stood behind him.

'I hope they will leave some men behind, to make sure she doesn't kill us in our sleep.'

Tóti turned and looked at Margrét's hard face. She, too, was squinting to see the riders, and her forehead was puckered in creases. Her grey hair had been pulled into two taut braids and coiled, and she was wearing her best black cap. Tóti noticed that she'd changed out of the dirty apron she'd received him in earlier that night.

'Will your daughters join us out here?'

'They're too tired to stand. I've sent them both to bed. Don't see why the criminal has to be brought in the middle of the night.'

'To avoid disturbing your neighbours, I should think,' he remarked, tactfully.

Margrét bit her lower lip, and a flush of colour spread across her cheeks.

'I do not like to share my home with the Devil's children,' she said, her voice lowering to a whisper. 'Reverend Tóti, we must make it be known that we do not want her company. Let the woman be removed to an island if they won't keep her at Stóra-Borg.'

'We must all do our duty,' Tóti murmured, watching the trail turn and head up towards the home field. He took a snuff horn from his breast pocket and removed a small pinch. Delicately setting it on the hollow beside the knuckle of his left thumb, he bent his head and sniffed.

Margrét coughed and spat. 'Even if it means we are stuck like pigs in the night, Reverend Tóti? You are a man, a young man, yes, but a man of God. I don't think she would kill you. But us? My daughters? Lord, how will we sleep in peace?'

‘They will leave an officer with you,’ Tóti muttered, turning his attention to a lone rider who was now cantering towards them.

‘They must. Or else I’m marching her back to Stóra-Borg myself.’

Margrét twisted her hands against her stomach, and turned her gaze to a small flock of ravens that flew silently across the mountain range of Vatnsdalsfjall. They looked like black ashes, whorling in the sky.

‘Are you a man of traditions, Reverend Tóti?’ Margrét asked.

Tóti turned to her, considering the question. ‘If they be noble and Christian.’

Margrét pursed her lips. ‘Do you know the right name for a flock of ravens?’

Tóti shook his head and spat tobacco juice into the turf wall surrounding them.

‘A conspiracy, Reverend. A conspiracy.’ She raised an eyebrow, challenging him to disagree.

Tóti watched the ravens settle on the eaves of the cattle barn. ‘Is that so, Mistress Margrét? I thought they were called an unkindness.’

Before Margrét had time to answer, the rider who was cantering towards them reached the edge of the home field.

‘Komið þið sæl og blessuð,’ he shouted.

‘Drottin blessi yður. And may the Lord bless you,’ they responded, in unison. Margrét and Tóti waited until the man had dismounted before they approached him. They exchanged formal, customary kisses. The man was damp with sweat and smelt strongly of horses.

‘She’s here,’ he said breathlessly. ‘I think you’ll find her wearied by the journey.’ He paused again, to remove his hat and run a hand through his sweaty hair. ‘I do not think she will trouble you.’

Margrét snorted.

The man gave a cold smile. ‘We’ve been ordered to stay here tonight to make sure of it. We’ll camp by the home field.’

Margrét nodded solemnly. ‘So long as you don’t trample the grass. Would you like some milk? Whey and water?’

‘Thank you,’ the man replied. ‘We’ll reimburse you for your kindness.’



‘No need.’ Margrét pursed her lips. ‘Just make sure the bitch stays away from the knives in my kitchen.’

The man sniggered and turned to follow Margrét into the turf home. Tóti grabbed his arm as he passed.

‘The prisoner has requested that I speak with her. Where is she?’

The man pointed to a horse furthest from the croft. ‘She’s the one with the sour mouth. The younger maid remains in Midhóp. They say she’s awaiting the result of an appeal.’

‘An appeal? I thought they were doomed?’

‘A lot of people Vatnsnes way hope Sigga will receive a pardon from the King. Too young and sweet to die.’ The man pulled a face. ‘Not like this one. She has a right temper when she fancies.’

‘Is she awaiting an appeal?’

The man laughed. ‘I don’t fancy her chances. Blöndal’s behind the youngest. They say she reminds him of his wife. This one... Well, Blöndal wants to set an example.’

Tóti gazed down at the horses now gathered at the edge of the home field. The men had begun to dismount and attend to their packs. Only one figure remained mounted. He bent closer to the man.

‘Is there a proper name? What should I call—’

‘Just Agnes,’ the man interrupted. ‘She’ll answer to Agnes.’



We’ve arrived. The men from Stóra-Borg are dismounting a little distance from the crooked farmhouse of Kornsó. Two figures stand outside the croft, a woman and a man, and the rider who announced my forfeited rights is walking up to them. No one is coming to unscrew my irons. Perhaps they have forgotten me. The woman ducks her head to go back indoors; coughing and spitting like a crone, but the man remains to talk with the Stóra-Borg officer.

To my left is laughter – two officers are pissing on the ground. I can smell it on the warm air. As usual, no one has noticed that

I haven't eaten or had a sip of water all day; my lips are as split as firewood. I feel the same as when I was little and hungry, as though my bones are growing larger in my body, as if my skeleton is about to shiver out of me. I have stopped bleeding. I am no longer a woman.

One of the men is walking towards me, taking quick, long strides over the home field. Don't look at him.

'Hello, Agnes. My... My name is Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson. I am the Assistant Reverend from Breidabólstadir in Vesturhóp.' He is out of breath.

Don't look up. It's him. It is the same voice.

He coughs, then bends as if to kiss me according to custom, but hesitates, stepping backwards and nearly tripping over a tussock. He surely smells the dried piss on my stockings.

'You asked for me?' His voice is uncertain.

I look up.

He doesn't recognise me. I don't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. His hair is as red as before, as red as the midnight sun. It looks as though his locks have soaked up the light as a skein of wool suffers the dye. But his face is older. It has thinned.

'You asked for me?' he says again, licking his lips nervously. When I look him in the eye he glances away, then quickly wipes the sweat off his upper lip, leaving a trail of dark specks. Snuff? He doesn't want to be here.

My tongue has swollen in my mouth and it cannot be moved to form words. What would I say to him anyway, now that it has come to this? I pick at the scabs on my wrists where the irons chafe the skin, and blood bubbles up to the surface. He notices.

'Well. I must... I'm glad to have met you, but... It's late. You must be... Uh, I will call again soon.' He bows awkwardly, then turns and walks away, tripping in his haste. He goes before I can let him know I understand. I smear the fresh blood across my arm as I watch him stumble to his horse.

Now I am alone. I watch the ravens, and listen to the horses eat.



Once the men from Stóra-Borg had eaten and retired to their tents for the night, Margrét picked up the dirty wooden bowls and returned inside. She smoothed the blankets over her sleeping daughters, and walked slowly around the small room, bending down to pick up the strands of dry grass that had fallen from the turf layered between the rafters. She despaired at the dust in the room. The walls had once been panelled with Norwegian wood, but Jón had removed the boards to pay a debt owed to a farmer across the valley. Now the bare walls of turf collapsed their dirt and grass onto the beds in summer, and grew dank in winter, issuing moulds that dripped onto the woollen blankets and infested the lungs of the household. The home had begun to disintegrate, a hovel that had spread its own state of collapse to its inhabitants. Last year two servants had died from diseases wrought by the damp.

Margrét thought of her own cough, and instinctively brought a hand to her mouth. Ever since the news brought by the District Commissioner, her lungs had issued rot with increased regularity. She rose each morning with a weight upon her chest. Margrét could not tell whether it was dread of the criminal's arrival, or the night's accumulated dross in her lungs, but it made her think of the grave. Everything's collapsing inward, she thought.

One of the officers had gone to fetch Agnes from where they had left her tied with the horses. Margrét had only caught a distant glimpse of the woman when she had left the dark rooms of the farm to bring the men their supper – a slight blur of blue, a smudge of skirt being hauled off a horse. Now her heart thumped. Soon the murderess would be in front of her. She would see the woman's face; feel her warmth in the small confines. What was to be done? How to behave in front of such a woman?

If only Jón were here, she thought. He could tell me what I should say to her. It takes a man, a good man, to know how to manage a woman who has made her bed among stones.

Margrét sat down and absently picked at the grass in her hand. She had managed the servants who had drifted through her husband's household for almost four decades, across as many farms, and yet she felt sluggish with her own uncertainty and apprehension. This woman, this Agnes, was not a servant, certainly no guest, and no pauper. She deserved no charity, and yet, she was condemned to die. Margrét shuddered. The light from the lamp played her shadow across the floorboards.

Dull footsteps sounded from the farm doorway. Margrét stood quickly, the gathered grass fluttering to the ground as she released her clenched fists. The officer's voice boomed from the darkness of the corridor.

'Mistress Margrét of Kornsó? I have the prisoner. May we enter?'

Margrét took a deep breath and straightened her posture. 'This way,' she commanded.

The officer entered the badstofa first, smiling broadly at Margrét, who stood stiffly, her hands gripping the cloth of her apron. She glanced to where her daughters lay sleeping and felt the blood pulse in her throat.

There was a moment of silence as the officer blinked to accustom his eyes to the low light of the badstofa, and then, abruptly, he pulled the woman into the room.

Margrét was unprepared for the filth and wretchedness of the woman's appearance. The criminal wore what seemed to be a servant's common working dress of roughly woven wool, but one so badly stained and caked with dirt, that the original blue dye was barely discernible under the dark grease that spread across the neckline and arms. A thick weight of dried mud pulled the fabric awkwardly from the woman's body. Margrét could not see any shift, and the woman had no apron. Her dark blue stockings were soaked through, sunk about the ankles, and one was torn, exposing a slice of pale skin. Her shoes, of sealskin it seemed, had split at the seam, but were so covered in mud that it was impossible to see how damaged they were. Her hair was uncovered by a cap and matted with grease.

It hung in two dark braids down her back. Several strands had become loose and fell limply about the woman's neck. She looks as if she's been dragged from Stóra-Borg, Margrét thought. The woman's face was hidden; she stared at the ground.

'Look at me.'

Agnes slowly raised her head. Margrét winced at the smear of dried blood across the woman's mouth, and the grime that lay in streaks across her forehead. There was a yellow bruise that spread from her chin down to the side of her neck. Agnes's eyes flickered from the ground to Margrét's own, and she felt unnerved by their intensity, their colour made lighter and sharper from the dirt on her face. Margrét turned to the officer.

'This woman has been beaten.' The officer searched Margrét's face for amusement, and, finding none, lowered his eyes.

'Where are her things?'

'Only the clothes on her back,' the officer said. 'The clerks took what she had to cover her vittles.'

Invigorated by a sudden curl of anger, Margrét pointed to the irons about the woman's wrists.

'Is it necessary to keep her bound like a lamb ripe for slaughter?' she asked him.

The officer shrugged and felt about him for a key. In a few deft twists he loosed Agnes from the handcuffs. Her arms fell to her sides.

'You may go now,' Margrét told the officer. 'One of you may come in when I retire to sleep, but I want some time alone with her.'

The officer's eyes grew wide. 'Are you certain?' he asked. 'It's not safe.'

'As I said, I'll ask for you when I retire to bed. You may wait outside the doorway and I'll call out should there be need for it.'

The officer hesitated, then nodded and left with a salute. Margrét turned to Agnes, who stood, unmoving, in the doorway.

'You,' she said, 'you follow me.'

Margrét did not wish to touch the woman, but the lack of light indoors forced her to grip Agnes's arm in order to steer her into the

right room. She could feel the bones in her wrist, crusted blood against her fingertips. The woman smelt like stale urine.

‘This way,’ Margrét walked slowly down to the kitchen, ducking her head under the low doorframe.

The kitchen was lit by the dying embers of the fire in the raised hearth of stones, and a small hole in the thatched turf ceiling that served as a chimney. It let through a weak, pink light that lay across the packed earth floor and illuminated the smoke that hung about the room. Margrét led Agnes inside, then turned and faced her.

‘Take off your clothes. You need to wash if you’re going to sleep in my blankets. I won’t have you infesting this house with any more lice than already plague the place.’

Agnes’s face was impassive. ‘Where is the water?’ she croaked.

Margrét hesitated, and then turned to a large kettle that sat upon the coals. Plunging her hand into it, she pulled out crockery that had been left to soak, and then heaved it onto the ground.

‘There,’ she said. ‘And it’s warm. Now hurry up, it’s past midnight.’

Agnes looked at the kettle and then suddenly fell to the ground. At first Margrét thought she had fainted, then quickly realised her mistake. She watched as Agnes bent her head over the kettle’s rim and scooped handfuls of greasy water into her mouth, gasping and drinking with the same urgency as an animal at a trough. Water ran down her chin and neck, dripping into the stiff folds of her dress. Without thinking, Margrét bent down and pushed Agnes’s forehead back from the kettle.

The woman fell back upon her elbows and let out a cry, water gurgling from her mouth. Margrét’s heart lurched at the sound. Agnes’s eyes were half-closed, her mouth open. She looked like those Margrét had seen driven out of their minds by drink, or by haunting, or by grief that sets in when deaths fall thickly in the home.

Agnes let out a whimper and rubbed the back of her hand across her mouth, then upon her dress. She pushed herself up from the ground and tried to stand.

‘I’m thirsty.’

Margrét nodded, her heart still hammering in her chest. She swallowed hard.

‘Ask for a cup, next time,’ she said.



When Reverend Tóti returned to his father’s croft near the Breidabólstadir church, he was damp through with sweat. He had ridden hard from Kornsó, digging his heels into his horse’s flanks as the wind buffeted his face and brought the blood to his cheeks.

Slowing to a walk, he guided his cob, foam dripping from its mouth, to a stile near the croft’s entrance. He dismounted with trembling legs. The wind had picked up, and as it pushed through the tight weave of his clothes, he felt his sweat-soaked skin grow cool and begin to itch. His jaw was clenched. His hands shook as they wound the reins through the stile.

Heavy clouds had blown in from the sea, and the light was fast disappearing, despite it not being long after summer solstice. Tóti pulled his damp collar up further about his neck and pushed his hat firmly down upon his head. Giving his horse a pat on the rump, he started walking up the slow incline to the church upon the hill. He felt like a wet rag wrung dry and left distorted upon the ground. These northern days, with their lingering fingers of light, the constant gloaming, unsettled him. He could not guess at time as he could at the school in the south.

Just gone the witching hour, he supposed.

Rain began to fall and the gale grew stronger. It lashed at the tall grass, flattening the stalks to the ground before whipping them skywards again. The grass seemed silver in the darkening light.

Tóti took long strides up the hill, stretching his muscles as he walked, thinking about his meeting with the woman. The woman. The criminal. Agnes.

He had noticed, first, how, bound to the saddle, she had splayed her legs over the horse so that she would not slip. He had smelt her,

then; the sharp pungency of a neglected body, of unwashed clothes and fresh sweat, dried blood and something else from between those spread legs. A stench peculiar to women. He blushed at the thought of it.

But it had been not her smell that had sickened him. She had looked like a new corpse, fresh dug from the grave. Feral black hair strung with grease, and the brown-grey of dirt sitting in the pores of her skin. Leprous colours.

He had wanted to turn away. Flee at the sight of her. Like a coward.

Hunched against the smattering of rain and wind, Tóti walked the incline to the church in the darkening light and inwardly chastised himself.

What sort of man are you if you want to run at the sight of damaged flesh? What sort of priest will you be if you cannot withstand the appearance of suffering?

It had been a particularly vivid bruise upon her chin that had disturbed him the most. A ripe, yellow colour, like dried egg yolk. Tóti wondered at the force that might have birthed it. The rough hand of a man, gripping her under the throat. A rope binding her to fetters. A fall.

There are so many ways a person might take harm, Tóti thought. He reached the churchyard and fumbled with the gate.

It might have been an accident. She might have hurt herself.

The Reverend hurried down the stony path to the church, trying not to look at the shadowy graves and their wooden crosses. Drawing a crude key from his pocket, he let himself inside. He was relieved to close the wooden door behind him and shut out the low growl of the wind. Inside, it was perfectly still. The only sound was the light patter of rain on the church's solitary window, a hole covered with fish-skin.

Tóti pulled the hat off his head and ran a hand through his hair. The floorboards creaked as he walked to the pulpit. He stood for a moment, squinting up at the painted mural behind the altar. The last supper.



The mural was ugly: a vast table with a squat Jesus. Judas, lingering in the shadows, was troll-like, comical. The artist had been the son of a local farmer who had a Danish wife and connections with the government. After service one Sunday, Tóti had overheard the farmer speak with Reverend Jón, complaining about the flaking paint of the previous mural. The farmer had mentioned his son, the artistic talent that had secured the boy a scholarship in Copenhagen. If Reverend Jón would permit him to express his singular devotion to the parish, he would happily purchase all necessary materials and donate his son's labour without the church incurring expenses. Naturally, Tóti's father, being a man of economic mindfulness, had allowed the old picture to be painted over.

Tóti missed it. It had been a fine Old Testament illustration of Jacob wrestling with the angel, the man's face buried against the angel's shoulder, his fist full of holy feathers.

Tóti sighed and slowly sank to his knees. Placing his hat on the floor, he clasped his hands tightly to his chest and began to pray aloud.

'O Heavenly Father, forgive me my sins. Forgive me my weakness and fear. Help me to fight my cowardice. Strengthen my ability to withstand the sight of suffering, so that I might do your work in relieving those who endure it.

'Lord, I pray for the soul of this woman who has committed a terrible sin. Please give me words so that I might inspire her to repent.

'I confess to fear. I do not know what to say to her. I do not feel at ease, Lord. Please guard my heart against the... the horror this woman inspires in me.'

Tóti remained on his knees for some time. It was only the thought of his horse standing bridled in the rain and wind that caused him to finally rise and lock the church door behind him.



Margrét woke early the next day. The officer who had slept in the bed opposite to protect her from the criminal was snoring.

The gargled breathing had entered her dreams and roused her.

Margrét turned in her bed to face the wall and dug the corners of her blanket into her ears, but the man's ragged snorting filled her head. Sleep was gone from her now. She lay on her back and looked across the unlit room to where the officer lay. His rough blond hair stuck up in oily tufts, and his mouth was open upon his pillow. Margrét noticed spots along the man's jaw.

So this is how they protect me against a murderess, she thought. They send a boy who sleeps soundly.

She cast an eye to the prisoner, lying in one of the servants' beds at the far end of the room. The woman was lying still, asleep. Her daughters were also sleeping. Margrét sat up on her elbows to take a better look.

Agnes.

Margrét silently mouthed the word.

It seemed wrong to call her by a Christian name, Margrét thought. What would they have called her in Stóra-Borg, she wondered. Prisoner? Accused? Condemned? Perhaps it was the absence of a name, the silence where a name should be, that they had summoned her by.

Margrét shivered and drew the blanket about her. Agnes's eyes were shut fast and her mouth closed. The cap Margrét had given her the night before had unfastened during the night, and had let slip her dark hair. It lay across the pillow like a stain.

Strange to finally see the woman after a month of anticipation, Margrét thought. A month of fear, too. A tight fear, like a fishing line, hooked upon something that must, inevitably, be dragged from the depths.

In the days and nights after Jón had returned from meeting with Blöndal, Margrét had tried to imagine how she would act towards the murderess, and what the woman might look like.

What sort of woman kills men?

The only murderesses Margrét had known were the women in the sagas, and even then, it was with words that they had killed men;

orders given to servants to slay lovers or avenge the death of kin. Those women murdered from a distance and kept their fingers clean.

But these times are not saga times, Margrét had thought. This woman is not a saga woman. She's a landless workmaid raised on a porridge of moss and poverty.

Lying back down in her bed, Margrét thought of Hjördis, her favourite servant, now dead and buried in the churchyard at Undirfell. She tried to imagine Hjördis as a murderess. Tried to imagine Hjördis stabbing her as she slept, the same way Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson died. Those slender fingers wrapped tightly around a hilt, the silent footsteps in the night.

It was impossible.

Lauga had asked Margrét whether she thought there would be an outward hint of the evil that drives a person to murder. Evidence of the Devil: a harelip, a snaggle tooth, a birthmark: some, small outer defect. There must be a warning, some way of knowing, so that honest people could keep their guard. Margrét had said no, she thought it all superstition, but Lauga had remained unconvinced.

Margrét had instead wondered if the woman would be beautiful. She knew, like everyone else in the north, that the famous Natan Ketilsson had had a knack for discovering beauty. People had thought him a sorcerer.

Margrét's neighbour, Ingibjörg, had heard that it was Agnes who had caused Natan to break off his affair with Poet-Rósa. They had wondered if this meant the servant would be more beautiful than her. It was not so hard to believe a beautiful woman capable of murder, Margrét thought. As it said in the sagas, *Opt er flagð í fögru skinni*. A witch often has fair skin.

But this woman was neither ugly nor a beauty. Striking perhaps, but not the sort to inspire hungry glances from young men. She was very slender, elf-slender as the southerners would put it, and of an ordinary height. In the kitchen last night, Margrét had thought the woman's face rather long, had noted high cheekbones and a straight nose. Bruises aside, her skin was pale, and it seemed

more so because of the darkness of her hair. Unusual hair. Rare for a woman to have hair like that in these parts, thought Margrét. So long, so dark in colour: an inky brown, almost black.

Margrét drew the covers up to her chin as the officer's snores continued their unceasing rumble. One would think an avalanche was approaching, she thought, annoyed. She felt tired, and her chest was heavy with mucous.

Images of the woman crowded behind Margrét's closed eyelids.

The animal way Agnes had drunk from the kettle. Her inability to undress herself. The woman's hands had fumbled at the ties; her fingers had been swollen and would not bend. Margrét had been forced to help her, using her fingertips to crumble the dried mud off Agnes's dress so that the lacings could be undone. Within the small confines of the kitchen, smoky as it was, the stench from the clothes and from Agnes's sour body had been enough to make Margrét retch. She had held her breath as she pulled the fetid wool off Agnes's skin, and had turned her head away when the dress fell from those thin shoulders and dropped to the floor, raising motes of dried mud.

Margrét recalled Agnes's shoulder blades. Razor-sharp, they'd poked out from the rough cloth of her undergarment, which was yellowed around the neckline and stained a filthy brown under the armpits.

Margrét would have to burn all the woman's clothes before breakfast. She had left them in the corner of the kitchen last night, unwilling to bring them into the badstofa. Fleas had crawled through their weave.

Somehow, she had managed to wash off most of the grime and dirt from the criminal's body. Agnes had tried to wash herself, feebly running the damp rag over her limbs, but the grime had been so long upon her skin that it seemed ground into her pores. Eventually, Margrét, rolling up her sleeves and clenching her teeth, had snatched the rag, picked up the kettle of water, and emptied it over Agnes's head. She had scrubbed Agnes until the rag had wrung out black, and the woman's pale colour emerged. As she washed her, Margrét had – in spite of herself – looked for the blemishes

Lauga had thought would be evident, a sign of the murderess.

Only the woman's eyes had hinted at something. They seemed different, Margrét thought. Very blue and clear, but too light a shade to be considered pretty.

The woman's body was a terrain of abuse. Even Margrét, accustomed to wounds, to the inevitable maladies wrought by hard labour and accident, had been shocked.

Perhaps she'd scrubbed Agnes's skin too hard, Margrét thought, pushing her head under the pillow in an effort to shut out the gargled snores of the officer. Some of the woman's sores had broken and wept. The sight of fresh blood had given Margrét some secret satisfaction.

She had made Agnes soak her hair, also. The water from the kettle had been too full of silt and scum, so Margrét had requested an officer fetch more from the mountain stream. While they waited, she had dressed the woman's wounds with an ointment of sulphur and lard.

'This is Natan Ketilsson's own medicine,' she had said, casting an eye up to catch the woman's reaction. Agnes had said nothing, but Margrét thought she had seen the muscles in her neck tighten. 'God rest his soul,' she had muttered.

With Agnes's hair washed as good as could be in the freezing water, and most of the weeping sores plugged with lard, Margrét had given her the undergarments and bedding of Hjördis. Hjördis had been wearing the underdress Agnes now slept in when she died. Margrét suspected it did not make a difference if a mite of contagion lingered. Its new owner would be dead soon enough.

How strange to imagine that, in a short while, the woman who slept in a bed not ten feet from her would be underground.

Margrét sighed and sat up in bed again. Agnes still had not moved. The officer snored on. Margrét watched him as he pushed a hand into his groin and scratched it, audibly. She averted her eyes, amused and a little annoyed that this man was her only protection. Might as well get up and begin preparing something for the officers'

breakfast, she thought. Skyr perhaps. Or dried fish. She wondered whether she had enough butter to spare, and when the servants would return from Reykjavík with their supplies.

Loosening her nightcap, Margrét cast one last glance at the sleeping woman.

Her heart jumped into her mouth. In the dim recesses of the badstofa, Agnes lay on her side, calmly watching Margrét.





Hannah Kent was born in Adelaide in 1985. As a teenager she travelled to Iceland on a Rotary Exchange, where she first heard the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir. Hannah is the co-founder and deputy editor of Australian literary journal *Kill Your Darlings*, and is completing her PhD at Flinders University. In 2011 she won the inaugural Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript Award. *Burial Rites* is her first novel.

**Proofs available from January. Contact your sales rep or email [sophie.pusz@macmillan.com.au](mailto:sophie.pusz@macmillan.com.au) for your copy.**

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