

Scenes

Act I

“Islam is moving into the neighbourhood, “ he told his wife.

She walloped a silver metal mixing bowl with a wide, wooden spoon, smoothing the lumps in cake batter and adding another dent to the bowl’s blemished skin. She baked and cooked enough food to fill two freezers, putting in provisions as if doomsday could be endured by eating.

“What’s that dear?”

“The burkas. The women in burkas are at the beach.”

“What is that? The full dress that hides them or the scarf?”

“Hidden. Only their eyes are visible. It’s a damned good disguise for nefarious activities. I should put one of them in my movies.”

Scenes

She smiled and drew the spoon from the bowl. A few golden batter globs fell to the floor.

“Are you going to clean that up?”, he asked.

She was messy. She splattered the fridge with crimson shots on pasta night and greased the backsplash when she made fish and chips on Fridays. He offered to hire a cleaning woman but she said they couldn’t afford one.

“The screenplay can pay for it, Muriel.”

The royalty cheques came in every month, arriving in “government” envelopes, a clever subterfuge the studio used to hide his identity.

“Your movie. Yes, I forgot you were still working on it.”

“Damn it Muriel. I’m not ‘working on it’, it’s done and in the bag.”

She was hard on life, judgemental, as if she’d suffered some hardship in childhood, as if her stories about the Depression were true. She treated his creative efforts like lumps, something to beat down. And she ignored what he told her, not the way she had for the past thirty years when her apathy and disinterest trapped his words. Now he’d tell her something useful, like when garbage collection included recycling, but she’d put out yard waste bags filled with food scraps. Her cognitive chain was slipping off its sprocket.

“We already talked about this Muriel. Every conversation with you turns into a committee meeting, long discussions that turn and turn until nothing is resolved. I also told you about putting Bark in the next movie.”

“Oh, that would be lovely, Stuart. Bark is very photogenic.”

The cat was ugly and lazy. It only moved to eat or find a different spot to sleep in, but it was quieter than a child. Muriel’s mood had dulled since their daughters left home, although the

Scenes

youngest girl called daily to ask if he made sure the pills were taken in the right amounts at the scheduled times.

“Children should be seen and not heard,” his mother used to say. She hosted a bridge club every Thursday and insisted he say hello to the same three stout women every week, who pinched his ears and tousled his hair before tipping a Tom Collins into their loud, crinkly mouths. One of the women tried to put her crinkles on his lips, barely touching him before he flailed his arms and upset her drink.

“Isn’t Bark a Persian, Muriel? Maybe the cat could play a terrorist in the movie. Strap explosives on his back.”

He stepped over the batter blobs on the kitchen floor and opened the cabinet where he hid a bottle of scotch. The good thing about her faltering mind was it permitted indiscretions without having to hear her lectures about health and longevity. She always had a tidbit from the Mayo Clinic to remind him that his earthly pleasures meant less time on the planet. “Every drink cuts five minutes from your life,” she’d advise. “I’d rather die a year early than drink Club Soda until I’m ninety,” he replied.

“Bark is Siamese. And he’s only a terrorist to birds.”

“Well, that’s fine. We’ll leave him out, but I don’t like these burkas. It’s disingenuous to make the women hide. I’m going my office to read a script and drink my ginger-ale.”

“That’s a good idea. We’ll have cheese and cocktails at five.”

He filled his tumbler two-fingers high and retreated to his office. Bark was sitting on his chair.

“Get off my damn chair you filthy bastard.”

Scenes

The cat had an unnerving affinity for him. They should have got a dog instead, but Muriel didn't want something that might love her more than her own daughters did.

Act II

When their two girls were five and six years old he built floating shelves in the dining room, to hold Muriel's baskets and bins, and he screwed metal legs onto a coffin-sized tiger-maple slab to make a platform for her sewing machine. Muriel spent afternoons sewing dance outfits and Halloween costumes, quilts and blankets, and cute dresses. When the girls stopped lessons and started buying their own clothes from a vintage shop, Muriel sewed for neighbours. After the girls moved out she quit sewing and launched her cooking campaign. Within another year she'd hired a handyman to paint the dining room walls white, replace the carpet with hardwood, swap the lightbulbs from humming halogens to silent LEDs, and remove the lock from the French door.

"This is your new office," she proclaimed. For three months he refused to use it.

"It's good to have you on the main floor, Stuart, rather than walking up and down those stairs."

"You live longer if you use the stairs, Muriel. Maybe you want to kill me."

The bay window in the office drew light in mornings, his best time for writing. The desk revealed its grain and scratches in the sun and if he laid his arm flat on its top, his skin blended into the wood's striations, like a snake on the desert sand. When he took off his socks and slippers and put his foot on the desk, he imagined it was an ancient tortoise resting on driftwood.

Scenes

Muriel daily fanned out family photos on his desk, a nudge to help him remember a story that he could write into a new script. She always included one of his mother. His mother hadn't sewn or knitted or done much of anything expected from women. On Halloween, when he was twelve, she'd stripped a sheet from the spare bedroom and used scissors to gash two eye-holes in the middle of the sheet. She tossed it over his head and said its simplicity was ethereal, even lightly spooky.

"Why can't we buy a costume?" he asked. "Everyone else buys one."

"You are an individual, Stuart, and trying to emulate others makes you part of their herd."

"I'd rather join their herd than be part of yours."

She held a cigarette and glass of white wine, never favouring either hand for the task.

"You are different than those boys, Stuart. You will be special, and maybe famous one day. An 'international man'."

Now, at eighty-five, he was discreetly famous, known by the studio heads who clambered for his work, but he remained invisible to common folk.

"Are you alright in there? Do you need anything?"

Muriel poked her head through the doorway. She constantly measured his emotional temperature.

"I'm working on your clock. I'll show you the results later."

Muriel had turned eighty and needed to renew her driver's license. The test required her to draw a clock. She asked Stuart to draw a few and share his wisdom with her. He used a black Sharpie and swung his arm in wide arcs making near-perfect circles on white chart paper. With matador thrusts he could draw a dozen in less than five minutes.

Scenes

“Make sure the hands show 2:15,” she reminded him. “They like to see that for some reason.”

Muriel would surely lose her license. Their trip to the local cheese shop a day before turned into a set piece.

Muriel started by backing the car out from their driveway so fast that the trunk sprang open. Muriel slammed the brakes and swerved into their hydrangeas.

“Christ Muriel. Use your mirrors!”

Basic driving skills eluded her, and habits that should be ingrained and done without wilful intention, now required purpose. He’d tell her to slow down, stop, turn right or left; he was a human GPS, her damn driving instructor.

“Watch the curb Muriel. There’s a parking spot just up there. Between the tiny car and the big truck.”

“That’s not a good spot Stuart. We’ll have to walk too far. I’ll get closer to the show.”

These little slips in her speech were the audible clinks as her chain slipped.

After three attempts Muriel got the car into a parallel slot in front of the cheese store.

“Muriel. Did you hit something?”

The car was rocking on its shocks, bouncing like one of those tricked-out cars that drug dealers drove.

“Let’s stay in the car Stuart. Someone’s sitting on our trunk.”

A young man, maybe in his twenties, sat on their trunk, got up and sat down, repeating the cycle. He had draped the country’s flag around him, cape-style, and flapped his arms like a panicked bird fleeing a predator.

Scenes

“There’s an argument Muriel. Listen to this.”

He rolled his window down six inches.

The caped man yelled at a small, pretty woman, who wore a sensible peasant skirt and high boots. Whenever the man stood up his cape expanded like sails in the wind, and fluttered into a deflated bundle when he sat down. The woman rocked back and forth on her heels.

“I’m going to direct this Muriel. They’re getting it all wrong.”

Stuart heaved the door open and collapsed onto the curb. Muriel had parked too far into the street.

“Are you okay old man?” The caped figure walked around to Stuart and stood over him.

“Goddamn it. The girl needs to cry. We need her to react, show emotion, bounce off your anger. She’s not a cat, right?”

Muriel got out of the car and helped him to his feet.

“You’re not a superhero, boy. Just a guy yelling at a girl. Not very patriotic.”

The young man smiled at Stuart and waved to Muriel as he walked away. “Glad I’m not old,” he shouted, scuttling across the street.

“I’m sorry about this,” the girl said. “He’s my brother and sometimes the public gets to witness his moods. He’s not well.”

The girl reminded him of one of their daughters, although he couldn’t remember which daughter wore a peasant skirt.

“Nothing to worry about,” Muriel told her. “We all have our crosses to bear.”

Scenes

Act III

“That was something yesterday, Muriel. I don’t even like cheese.”

She served Brie and crackers daily with their five o’clock cocktails.

“Cheese is good for you Stuart.”

Muriel said the B12 in cheese inoculated you against a weakened mind.

“I’m going my office to work. Until five.”

He relished the few hours respite from her badgering and needed to write a scene for the crazy caped man and the sister.

“That’s fine Stuart. I’ll check on you in a bit.”

Muriel clomped up the stairs with a laundry basket against her hip, dropping a few black socks on the lower treads.

He sat at his desk and phoned his oldest daughter, the one who managed a store with “mountain” in its name.

“Hello kiddo. It’s your father. How are you?”

Her store was good, her kid was good. He answered her questions about his health and the weather and she skipped his comment about Bark as a terrorist.

“How warm is you sleeping bag?” he asked. “The one you took to camp?”

“I never went to camp, dad. What do you need it for?”

“Your mother is always cold and turning up the furnace. I’m a roasted peanut in this house. Maybe she could wrap herself in it when she knits or sews.”

Scenes

“I thought she stopped knitting.”

“Did she? Well she can use it when we have cocktails.”

Muriel had rigged the thermostat to make it look like the house was warm, then she'd ask if he was cold and give him a sweater.

“Dad, are you able to understand mom? You know she's trying.”

His daughter's voice hummed boredom and impatience and she said they would talk again soon. He waited for the dial tone before hanging up and yelled through the office doorway.

“Muriel. Where can I find the sleeping bags?”

She hated it when he yelled from one floor to another.

“Muriel?”

He heard a hard thump on the floor above, like a kangaroo slapping its feet on the shag carpet.

He went to his office and made clocks and at five he mixed drinks in the kitchen. Bark and Muriel lived by routine and Muriel's skittering mind did well with rituals and regimens. Predictability helped her adjust to a diminished horizon.

“Muriel. Last call for the bar.”

He mixed two Manhattans and sat in his kitchen chair, drizzling the burgundy elixir down his plaid shirt. When he finished his drink he started a slow climb up the stairs. Bark slithered past, pushing ahead, pulling focus, fully apprised of its leading role.

They found Muriel on the floor, her face burrowed into the carpet, her arms at her side. Her legs were straight and tight together; like a human missile, ready to fly.

He touched her face and Barked scraped his wet tongue along her eyebrows.

Scenes

Stuart could stop drawing clocks. Sometimes a movie ends badly. He'd call for a pick up.

He hobbled down the stairs and drank Muriel's cocktail, a brace he needed before phoning the hospital. It took three minutes of punching numbers and pound signs before he spoke to a real person.

"How can I direct your call?"

"I'd like to schedule a pick-up."

"Pick up what sir? You might have the wrong number."

"My wife. She's dead and I need you to come and get her."

"Sir, are you sure she's passed? We don't do that."

"She's donating her body to science and you'll want it fresh."

The hospital woman told him to call a funeral home and expressed her condolences for his loss. "Do you have family that can help?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He hung up and dialled 911.

"Do you need fire, ambulance or police?"

"Ambulance."

"What is the emergency?"

"My wife is dead and rotting. The scientists are waiting for her body."

The dispatcher's breathing seeped through the receiver.

"Wait for the police sir."

"There's no one here you need to arrest, damn it. I'll handle it myself."

Scenes

He hung up and went down to the basement to rummage through the storage boxes that Muriel had methodically labelled. Inside the plastic tote titled “KIDS CAMPING” he found the red mummy sleeping bag. He dragged it up to the main floor and rested a minute before ascending the next flight. He rolled the bag up Muriel’s body and remembered his daughters coming home giggling about condom lessons in gym class.

Should he zip the bag closed? The hospital folks might appreciate it open. He left her white face poking out, catching the zipper where her skin flowed along her neck.

“You look like one of those Russian stacking dolls Muriel.”

He pushed his thumb on her eyelids and pulled the heavy bag down the stairs one bump at a time. The second cocktail had fortified him and he planned to have another once he delivered her.

Half an hour later he got her into the trunk of their car. He started the engine, backed into the quiet street, turned right at the main boulevard and took the four-lane avenue to the hospital, a sequence he knew well. Muriel drove the route weekly so he could enjoy having a chauffeur and use the time to create new characters.

The hospital’s emergency entrance shone brighter than a bonfire. The light helped him find his exit off the avenue. He turned the car onto the ramp, overshot the narrow entrance and jumped the curb. The car landed on a flowered embankment, spinning its rear wheels until his foot landed on the brake pedal. He sat still, hooking his hands on the steering wheel at 10:10. No one came out from the hospital. A light rain fell onto the windshield, forming rivulets that teared down the glass.

“To hell it with Muriel. They never help you out.”

Scenes

He got out of the car and walked towards the bright light. The glass doors parted for him, a gracious, mechanical gesture. One of the nurses called his name.

“Stuart? Is everything alright?”

He disliked that one, her false compassion; making a movie changed how people treated you, brought out their phoniness.

“It’s not me. Muriel’s dead and I brought her to donate her body.”

Why did Muriel agree to donate her body to these butchers? They’d put her on a rendering table like the one in a hunting lodge and cut her into pieces.

“Not much difference between you and moose by then, Muriel.”

The nurse put her hand on his back and guided him into a chair.

“Stay here. I’ll get a doctor to help us, OK?”

“Sure. But tell them to hurry. She won’t stay fresh.”

Stuart sat down beside a young man. Stuart and the young man each shifted in their tiny seats and Stuart pushed on his heels to gain height.

“Are you hurt?” he asked the young man.

“Of course I’m hurt. Do you think I’m just killing time?”

“I have an old woman in my car, “ he whispered.

“What?”

The young man leaned in to Stuart. “What old woman?”

“She’s wrapped in a burka. The old woman is in my trunk and she’s going to be dissected.”

“Are you ok? Do you need help?”

Scenes

The young man was playing his part, one of those guys ready to take charge.

“Help me get her into the hospital. I’ll pay you to move the body.”

He grabbed the young man’s wrist and held it against his chest. His old heart sprinted past the young man’s beat.

“You don’t look well dude. You’re as white as a ghost.”

Stuart released their wrists and looked around the room for the sleeping bag. An age-spotted woman, opening and closing her mouth like a dying trout, lay on a cot in the hallway. A grey sheet was pulled up to her collarbone and blue slippers poked out from the bottom. Stuart rose from his seat and walked to her cot. He lay his hands on the grey blanket and tugged it up her face to the bridge of her nose. She fixed her eyes on him and wiggled her feet. A thankful gesture or a secret message?

“You can hide but no one will give you treats at Halloween. They never gave me anything.”

Muriel would like this movie.