

Scenes

Act I

“Islam is here,” he told his wife.

“Where? Who is here dear?”

His wife walloped a wooden spoon inside a silver metal mixing bowl, smoothing lumps in pancake batter and adding more dents to the bowl’s heavily pitted skin.

“The burkas. The women in them. They’re at the beach”, he said.

She smiled at him and drew the spoon from the bowl. Blobs of golden batter flew from the bowl and landed on the kitchen floor

“Are you going to clean that up?” he asked. She was a messy cook. She splattered the fridge with crimson shots on spaghetti night and greased the

backsplash on fish-and-chip Fridays. He suggested they get a cleaning lady once-a-week, maybe the same woman who worked on the house next door, but his wife said they couldn't afford it.

"Nonsense. I'll pay for it with my next screenplay," he said.

"Yes, of course, your movie. I forgot you were still working on that," she replied.

"Damn it Muriel, I'm not working on it. It's done and in the bag. You know that."

She was hard on life, and judgemental, as if she'd suffered some hardship in childhood, as if her stories about growing up in the Depression were true. And she treated his creative work like lumps in batter, something to beat down. She ignored him too, but not in the way she once trapped his words in apathy and disinterest. He'd tell her something useful, like the schedule for garbage collection, but she'd put out recycling. Her cognitive chain was slipping off its sprocket.

"We talked about the movie Muriel. Did you forget or just not listen? And I'm putting Bark in it."

He cantilevered himself up from the chair and transposed his slippers along an imaginary line through the batter. "I'm going to my study," he said, and found Bark sitting on his desk

"Get off the desk ya filthy animal." He remembered a similar line from a movie, a pretty good one he thought, but the title eluded him, as did the actor.

"Muriel, this cat won't move!"

Bark was a mess of matted fur and inertia, who slept most of the day, or skulked about the house, but was quieter than a dog or children.

“Is Bark a Persian, Muriel? Maybe he could be a terrorist in my movie, a suicide-bomber cat.”

Muriel came into the study and waved a tea towel at Bark.

“He’s Siamese, and he’s only a terrorist as far as birds are concerned.”

“I’m having a short bourbon and going to do some work Muriel. And then a nap. I don’t care what you think.” She’d lectured him for years about health and longevity and recently started sharing snippets of useful information she gleaned from the Mayo Clinic website. He hated these intrusions into his pleasures and when she’d told him that “every drink cuts five minutes from your life” he replied “I’d rather die a year earlier than spend my final twelve months sipping Club Soda.” Muriel reluctantly stocked the liquor cabinet in his study with his favourite bourbon, Four Roses, but kept a record of his consumption and replenished the bottles slower than a nurse providing a new IV drip.

“I’ll pour it for you,” she said. “Two fingers deep and no ice.” She prepared the drink and sat it on his desk.

“That’s fine, we’ll leave Bark out of the movie. Let’s hope they don’t take over the beach.”

“I doubt those women are interested in ruining things for anyone. That’s why they’re here.”

“Don’t underestimate imagination, Muriel.”

Act II

Muriel's mother like to say "there are no victims, only volunteers". She used it to explain the misfortune that befell family and friends, but reserved it only for those failures she judged to be self-inflicted, not those rendered by a testy God or sheer bad luck. "My sister died of pancreatic cancer in six months, because only the good die young" she said, "but Uncle Ed's wife running off with his money isn't fate or heavenly intervention. He made a bad choice marrying her. Everyone told him not to."

When she was twelve and challenging her mother, Muriel asked about the Holocaust, if the Jews were volunteers or victims, or if God had taken the day off, or was it just a roll of the cosmic dice and another group might have suffered. Was it bad luck that befell the Jews?

"I don't know any of them personally, so I can't say for sure," her mother answered.

Her mother had a catalogue of sayings, readily available as instructions or admonishments. "Children should be seen and not heard" was the reason Muriel was not allowed to engage with her mother's three stout bridge-club friends every second Thursday. "There's a girl who hangs her fiddle at the door," her mother said when Muriel came home after spending an entire day out with friends. "Your mood certainly changes when you walk in the house."

Stuart's mother was widowed at thirty and left with a sum of money large enough to prevent a dreadful need to monitor monthly budgets, but insufficient to permit conspicuous consumption. She had no interest in love or lust after Stuart's father passed and spent her evenings writing poetry and playing piano. She'd hold a cigarette in one hand and a glass of wine in the other, not favouring either for the task, and demand that Stuart read her poems aloud. "You must drop your voice at the end of each line Stuart, the listener must ponder the words." She settled her ambition on Stuart and told him "you are different than the other boys. You will one day be well-known, an 'international man', creative and witty."

As his mother wished and predicted, he became famous. The studios clambered for his scripts and one of them had recently started sending monthly royalty payments to him in cleverly disguised envelopes. "They look like they're from the government Muriel. This'll keep the neighbours from knowing about my business."

"I don't think they care Stuart. They all have busy lives."

"Busybodies Muriel. Too much money and time on their hands."

Act III

When her two girls were young Muriel spent afternoons sewing costumes and dresses in the dining room. Three mannequins of progressively higher heights stood in the corner of the room; Muriel used them to fit the clothes she

made, moving from one mannequin to another as the girls grew. Stuart denounced her when she made a crisp white dress shirt for him, arguing that the shirt billowed where breasts should be and that they weren't so financially constrained that he needed to wear homespun clothes. After the girls left home Muriel substituted sewing with a cooking campaign and hired a handyman to paint the dining room walls white, replace the carpet with hardwood, remove the humming halogens and install LEDs, and replace the solid french doors with glass ones, and moved the mannequins to an empty bedroom on the top floor.

"This is your new office Stuart," she told him, escorting him around the repurposed dining room.

For three months he refused to move out of his basement office, ignoring her entreaties and advice.

"You need to be on the main floor Stuart. Easier on your back and you're less likely to fall." She recited statistics about the frequency of falls in the elderly and the death spiral that often accompanied broken hips.

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

The bay window in the dining room funnelled the sun's rays onto his tiger-maple desk, revealing its shop-worn scratches and indents. He liked to rest his right arm flat on the desk, to loosen the muscles and contemplate the story he'd write; his aged, brown skin blended into the wood grain, like a snake on desert sand. If he was stuck for an idea, he'd take off his socks and prop his feet on the desk and imagine ancient tortoises resting on driftwood.

For the past three mornings Muriel gave him tasks without clear purpose.

“Photos again, Muriel?”

Muriel fanned out twenty family photos on his desk. She did this every Tuesday.

“They’re a nudge to help you remember, Stuart, and I thought you might somehow include them in your writing.”

“Who’s this?” he asked, pointing at a curled black-and-white print.

“Your mother. Wasn’t she a looker!”

The woman in the photo looked nothing like him; her hair was blond and his father’s was red and Stuart had improbable black hair.

“And this one?” he asked Muriel, testing her enfeebled mind.

“That is me, just before we got married. I was nineteen.”

“Muriel, you never looked that tall. Are you sure it’s not your mother? Or one of our girls?”

“I know my own image Stuart. I know who I am.”

A day earlier Muriel had brought a sheet of chart paper, the kind he once used to sketch story boards, to his desk.

“I’d like you to draw a clock Stuart. And show me 2:15.”

She can’t read the clock on the kitchen wall any longer, he thought.

“We have a digital clock in the bedroom Muriel. Why can’t you just use that?” His patience had thinned after enduring a dozen requests for assistance in the past week.

Muriel handed him a Sharpie and watched as he swung his arm in a wide arc to make a near-perfect circle.

“You do that so well Stuart! Just like a matador.”

At least with the photos he could pretend Muriel was herself, maybe a little forgetful, needing only a tweak to her eyeglass prescription, but drawing clocks (or naming the days of the week for her, or organizing his socks into matching pairs) saddened him and he grieved; she was a fan-favourite character slowly being written out of a show.

Act IV

Muriel was turning eighty and scheduled to renew her driver’s license.

“We should go for a drive Muriel. See what you can do.”

“I’ll drive to the cheese shop. It’s only three blocks.”

Stuart predicted the challenge would turn into a set piece.

Muriel started the drive with a brake-and-go lurch as she backed out onto the street, narrowly avoiding a boy on a skateboard who yelled “crazy fuckers” at them.

“Use your mirrors Muriel!” Stuart pulled his shoulder belt forward like suspenders.

“Watch the curb.”

Driving habits that should be ingrained and done without wilful intention now required purposeful energy. Stop, turn left, turn right, slow down; he'd become a human GPS, and her driving instructor.

"There's a spot," he said, pointing to a slot between two towering SUVs.

"That's not a good one. Too far from the show," she replied.

Stuart noticed these malapropisms: audible sounds of her chain slipping.

"Store, not show," he corrected.

After three aborted tries Muriel got the car into a parallel spot.

"What the hell is that?" he shouted.

The car was rocking on its rear end.

"It's like we're in one of those tricked-out vehicles drug dealers drove in crime dramas from the seventies," Start said.

A young man, maybe in his twenties Stuart judged, alternated between sitting on their trunk and standing up. He had a towel draped over his shoulders and flapped his arms like a bird fleeing a predator.

Stuart lowered his window six inches.

"There's an argument, Muriel."

The man spoke loudly to a thin woman wearing a sensible skirt and boots. Her entire left arm was tattooed in vibrant colours that reminded Stuart of a macaw.

"I'm going to direct this Muriel. They're getting this all wrong."

Before Muriel could grab his arm he heaved himself out of the car and collapsed onto the curb.

“Are you all right?” the man asked Stuart.

“Goddam it, the girl needs to cry a bit. Show some emotion, make the argument worth something.” Stuart looked at the macaw while he spoke.

Muriel walked around the car to help Stuart to his feet.

“You’re not a superhero because you have a cape, or a towel, or whatever it is,” Stuart shouted. “Just a guy yelling at a girl.”

The young man smiled at Muriel and held the girl’s hand.

“Glad I’m not old,” he said to Stuart and walked across the street and around the corner. The macaw waved good bye to Muriel. Stuart clapped and yelled “bravo, bravo.”

Act V

“That was something Muriel. That show on the street earlier today.”

Muriel set a wooden board heavy with cheese and crackers on the coffee table and bookended it with two vodka martinis.

“Here’s some brie Stuart. Cheese is good for the mind. B12.”

“You can eat most of it then, Muriel. You need it more than I do.”

Stuart clutched the slender stem of his martini glass and carefully tilted it to his mouth, allowing only a few drops into his parched mouth. He didn’t want to dribble any and incite Muriel’s ministrations; she was constantly dabbing his chin with a napkin.

“Tastes a bit watery Muriel. Did you put shaved ice in the shaker, or ice cubes?”

“I make it the same way as I always do,” Muriel said, although she had reduced the vodka by a half ounce and added the same volume of cold water.

“I’m going to my office to review a script. I’ll come back for a glass of wine when I’m done.”

“Yes, that’s fine. I’ll drink my martini and read the paper. I might go upstairs to clean up my sewing.”

Stuart sat down at his desk and decided to call the youngest daughter, the one who had an unhealthy interest in their health.

“Hello kiddo. It’s your father.”

“Dad. Is everything OK?”

He answered her questions about the weather and pills and she said nothing when he told her about his idea of putting Bark in a movie.

“Listen, I need to know where your sleeping bag is. The one you used as a kid for camp.”

“I never went to camp dad. I backpacked. Why do you need it?”

“Your mother is complaining about being cold. She’s turning up the heat and I’m roasting like a peanut in this house. Maybe she can wrap herself in it when she’s sewing. Like a burka.”

“That’s not quite a burka dad.”

“No? Well, she won’t know the difference.”

His daughter's voice hummed along, bored and disinterested, and they ended their conversation with a perfunctory "talk soon".

Stuart drained his martini glass and yelled up the stairs.

"Muriel. Where can I find a sleeping bag?"

She didn't answer. She didn't approve anyone in the family yelling up, or down, the stairs. "Lazy people yell, ambitious people whisper," she said.

He heard a loud thump on the floor above; Muriel was moving her mannequins, possibly to vacuum the floor or search for dropped needles.

Stuart returned to his office and drew clocks for a half hour and went to the kitchen to pour their wine. He found a bottle of red, a label he didn't recognize, and prepared two generous glasses.

"Muriel, I'm starting without you."

No reply.

"Fine, I'll bring yours upstairs."

Stuart spilled a third of the burgundy elixir down the front of his plaid shirt. "Not much left for you to drink, Muriel," he said as he arrived on the second floor.

He found Muriel lying face down, burrowed into the carpet. Her legs and arms lay straight alongside her torso, as if she were a plank. She looked like a human about to be shot from a cannon. He touched her cheeks and noted that death felt plastic and cool. I'll need to put that in my script, he thought.

"Well, no more clocks Muriel. Or photos. I'll call someone."

He found Muriel's telephone book in the kitchen and under "H" he located the number for the hospital. They'd made a dozen trips to the hospital in the past year for Muriel, although he sometimes participated in the visits to offer her support ("Stuart, you should let the doctor take your blood pressure so I know how bad mine is" or "we need bloodwork for both of us, in case we need to donate to one another").

"How do you donate a body for science?" he asked the hospital receptionist.

She provided a long explanation about protocols and processes and funeral directors.

"What if you want a fresh body? Aren't the scientists waiting for these?"

The receptionist asked if he was sure there wasn't someone else whom she could talk to, someone who might be able to interpret his request.

"I don't have time and neither do your scientists," he said and hung up.

Stuart went to the guest room and tugged the quilt away from the neatly manicured bed. Muriel had sewn the patchwork as a distraction when the girls moved out. Stuart thought the quilt was a nice homage to both the girls and Muriel, and the hospital would appreciate a finely wrapped gift. It took him less than ten minutes to roll Muriel into the quilt and move her downstairs. He'd kept a fair amount of muscle by doing a few pushups every day, but was still impressed with his feat. He thought Muriel was heavier, but it had been years since his arms had held her.

Stuart placed Muriel lengthwise on the back seat of the car and took the four-lane avenue to the hospital. He knew the route well; he'd chauffeured Muriel

many times, riding in the passenger seat to keep an eye on her driving. More than once he'd grabbed the steering wheel when she overshot the hospital driveway. With dead Muriel in the back he committed his hands in the ten-and-two position, but still missed the curve into the hospital and drove the car onto the curb.

Stuart kept his foot on the brake, turned the car off, and got out. The Emergency sign, a marquee that invited people inside for drama and heartache, shone brighter than a bonfire. Stuart walked towards the light and past the glass doors that parted for him in a gracious, mechanical gesture.

"Stuart? Can I help you?" Are you OK?" A thin woman wearing a uniform, younger than his daughters, stopped him.

He instantly disliked this one. He'd met her before, he was sure of it. She was a nurse.

"I'm here with my wife. She is being donated to science." Stuart pointed outside. "She's in the backseat. Perfectly preserved."

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.

Stuart looked around the waiting room. 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 waved the nurse to move aside and walked to the cot. He lay his hands on the grey blanket and tugged it up the woman's face to the bridge of her nose. She fixed her eyes on him and wiggled her feet.

“It’s too cold to go to the beach,” he said. “But my movie needs a hospital scene, so stay alive until I can get something set up.”

The nurse hovered beside him and he felt compelled to sit down.

“Stuart, we’ll check your car, OK?,” she said.

“Send a paramedic,” he said. “They’ll confirm it.”

How was it possible that people could occupy the same space and time and create wildly dissimilar worlds? For fifty years he and Muriel often disputed facts or truth and were never able to agree on how they met, where they went on their first date, why they had children, or who made worse financial decisions.

The nurse sat beside him while they waited for Muriel to be brought from the car.

“Stuart. This is what you brought us.”

The paramedic held in his hand a severed arm.

“This is horrific,” Stuart said. “You can’t just start chopping her into pieces yet.”

“It’s plastic Stuart. This isn’t Muriel.”

In what alternative reality could the nurse and paramedic tell him a story that the body in his car was a mannequin? Or that Muriel was alive and had fallen asleep in the spare bedroom? There was no accounting for critics who didn’t “get” the film. Stuart knew he’d rewrite the scene. With Muriel’s part resurrected.