

Scenes

My dad likes to say that “there are no victims, only volunteers”. He’s used it all of his life to rationalize the misfortune that befell family, friends, or colleagues, but reserves it for those failures he judges to be self-inflicted, either through bad judgement or undue risk-taking. He never used it when his sister got pancreatic cancer or when my sister’s husband left her. When we were young my sister and I kept confidences with our mother about bad boyfriends and predatory bosses and told only good news to our father, a strategy that allowed him to believe we were good daughters, whom he didn’t have to “molly-coddle”. We could never be victims.

My parents live in a small town in north-western Ontario in a house on the main street. All the houses are the ones you’ve seen in any American movie depicting the 50s; wide lots and long lawns punctured by big maples and weeping willows, bounded by linear sidewalks on which families and seniors stroll by saying hello to the folks sitting on their porches. This is how my father still describes his neighbourhood to people, but most of the trees were euthanized ten years ago when their limbs began creaking and swaying precariously over roofs, and the sidewalks are cracked and uneven and festooned with abandoned dog crap and Tim Horton’s cups. Dad likes to sit on the porch in a folding nylon-mesh chair he bought at Walmart and if he sees

anyone drop a cup or ignore their squatting dog he'll yell at my mother to get him a drink. He refuses to accept that the sidewalk and the first ten feet of the front yard are city property, having been told this by a half dozen of the offenders.

I live a half hour away from my parents. My sister moved to Vancouver so she could fully escape them. Every morning my father calls me and prefaces the conversation with some odd assertion about human behaviour or an errant observation.

"Islam is moving into the neighbourhood," he told me last week.

"What does that mean Dad?"

"The burkas. The women in burkas are at Canadian Tire."

"It's just a style of dressing."

"It's a damned good disguise for nefarious activities. I should put one of them in my movies."

"What's Mom doing? Is she nearby?"

"She's making a bloody mess. She's in the kitchen. She's baked and cooked enough food to fill two freezers, as if doomsday can be endured by eating."

"Muriel, are you going to clean that up?", he asked her, loud enough for me to hear.

My mother is messy. She'd splatter the fridge with crimson shots on pasta night and greased the backsplash on fish-and-chip Fridays.

"We need to hire a cleaning lady," he said.

I told him that a live-in helper was probably a better idea, even if the cost was greater.

“My screenplay can pay for it,” he said. “My royalty cheques come in every month, in those fake government envelopes.” He said this was a clever subterfuge the studio used to hide his identity.

“Right, the movie”, I replied. “You’re still working on it?”

“I’m putting Bark in the next one,” he told me. “All your mother said was ‘Oh, that would be lovely, Stuart. Bark is very photogenic’.”

“Your mother’s cognitive chain has slipped off its sprocket,” he declared.

My sister named the cat Bark. He looks like a dandelion flower gone to seed and he’s lazy and only moves to eat or find a different spot to sleep in.

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

“Bark is Siamese, Dad. And he was only a terrorist to birds when he was young.”

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

It’s not ginger-ale. My dad hides a bottle of scotch in the kitchen cupboard. He fills his tumbler two-fingers high and retreats to his office with Bark. He thinks he can avoid mom’s lectures about health and longevity - diluted advice she gleans from the Mayo Clinic’s website - to remind him that his earthly pleasures mean less time for him on the planet. “Every drink cuts five minutes from your life,” she advised. “I’d rather die a year early than drink Club Soda and live to ninety,” he replied.

When my sister and I were kids, Dad built floating shelves in the dining room to hold Mom's baskets and bins. He screwed metal legs onto a coffin-sized tiger-maple slab to make a platform for her sewing machine and Mom spent afternoons sewing dance outfits and Halloween costumes, quilts and blankets, and cute dresses for us. We both stopped lessons at twelve and when my sister started buying her own clothes from a vintage shop Mom started sewing for neighbours. After we moved out she quit sewing and last year she hired a handyman to paint the dining room walls white, replace its 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, Stuart," she told my dad. For three months he refused to use it.

"It's good to have your father on the main floor, rather than walking up and down those stairs," she explained to me.

Dad protested.

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

The bay window shone in the sunrise, his best time for writing, he said. The tiger-maple revealed its grain and scratches in the sun. He'd lay his arm flat on the table top, and watch his skin blend into the wood's grain, 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.

Every morning Mom fanned out family photos and left them on his desk. She told him it was a nudge to help him remember a story that he might write into his latest script.

My dad tells everyone that he is discreetly famous, known only by the studio heads who clamor for his work, eager to see the latest script. I imagine him at his desk, typing the same line out over and over, like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*.

The doctor told Mom to make Dad to draw clocks; “they’re a simple measure of spatial orientation”, he told her. She asked Dad to draw a dozen every morning. He used a black Sharpie and showed me how he swings his arm in wide arcs making near-perfect circles on white chart paper.

“I’m like a matador,” he said as he thrust the Sharpie at the chart paper.

“Make sure the hands show 2:15,” Mom reminded him.

It’s cruel for her to use those numbers. A better time would be 11:10, with the hands nicely framing the face of the clock, like the old Timex watch ads that I remember.

“Mom, can’t you find another way to measure his spatial skills? Maybe have him do puzzles?”

“He doesn’t remember dates. I could use any numbers, even his birthday, and it wouldn’t matter.”

Every Friday I visit my parents for an hour to have cheese and crackers at their regular five o’clock cocktails. Dad wants to put peanut butter on the crackers but mom refuses.

“Cheese is good for you, Stuart.”

She says the B12 in cheese inoculates you against a weakened mind.

“Too late for me to make antibodies against stupidity, Muriel.”

I had a special ring for Dad’s calls—the theme song from M.A.S.H. , so I could let the call go to message and give me time to listen to his voice and measure the degree of urgency. Last Friday he called me at work, after eight; I was working overtime in the distribution centre, trying to get orders ready for fast delivery, and forgot my rule about not answering.

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

“I’m working. I told Mom I couldn’t make it tonight.”

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

“I never went to camp, Dad. I camped. There’s a difference.”

“No, you went to camp. You made a banjo. And read the bible.”

“Dad, that was you. Grandma sent you to bible camp. You were ten.”

“Maybe it was your sister.”

“Maybe.”

My sister never enjoyed the times we’d gone camping as a family. Dad would bring three tents and make me share one with my sister. When the third tent was empty he stored food in the it.

“Your mother always complains about being cold and she turns up the furnace. I’m a roasted peanut in this house. The sleeping bag might help her.”

“To sleep in?”

“No. When we have cocktails.”

“Dad, you know she’s trying to help.”

His voice hummed with impatience and he said we would talk again soon.

My sister thinks our parents are nuts and I shouldn't confuse eccentricities with disabilities.

"Dad's not that ill. I think he's purposely doing it. He's creating a fantasy world," she said.

"You think it's a lie, or an eccentricity?"

"Well, I'm sure their neighbours think he's odd. It's not a lie, just willed confabulation. Just because he thinks he's writing movies and yells at people doesn't mean he's lost his memories."

She moved to the west coast because of a coin toss. She'd bought two airline tickets: one for Halifax and one for Vancouver, and vowed to let the coin direct her. I suggested she make it three-out-of-five. "It's all or nothing," she said. Dad agreed that a coin was as good an arbiter of life as any other method and blessed her move to any ocean that fate determined. "It's your choice," he said.

When she landed in Vancouver and put roots into the mountain lifestyle, we'd speak on the phone weekly. Our conversations were pretty much like swimming in the top metre of a lake; we'd talk on the surface of most topics and never let ourselves dangle into the colder depths

where we can't see the bottom. This allowed us to remain civil and cordial, but now that we only talk once a month I sense that she is feeling her way into deeper water.

“Is he still drinking?”

“Not much. A few fingers, shallow stuff.”

“But Mom doesn't know? She's ignoring him.”

“Maybe. I think she sometimes plays along with him. I read that's what you should do with dementia patients, let them go on with their version of reality and accept it.”

“That's bullshit. She wants to go along on his trip. It helps her.”

What does my sister think she knows about our parents? I used to believe they were open books, painfully obvious people, burdened by diminishing affection, but as I've gotten older and watched them age I realize that they speak to one another in a foreign language. They speak in grief.

“Dad could write a great scene for me,” I told mom. She'd called to say that he'd written something for me.

“I wish your father could write a script and make us all better people. And make your sister call.”

I pulled my hood up and tightened the strings. I wear hoodies to swaddle myself. I'd never read anything he'd written, and was convinced his spiralling mind could only tell a jumbled story. He was good at telling tales, though.

“Your father always said he was the character model for Max Klinger from M.A.S.H.”

Mom tells this story whenever Dad is nudged off his rail. Dad used to tell it too.

“I know, Mom. He wanted to be a tail-gunner in the war until he found out that the enemy always shot that part of the plane first. Then he saw a ground crew use a hose to flush out the remains of a man from the ball turret.”

“Yes. So he asked to be assigned to another duty and they refused and then he wore a nurse’s uniform to visit his commander and told him he kept hearing a voice saying the word ‘potato’ over and over.”

“Then they put him in the kitchen.”

“Your father wasn’t a victim.”

“Your father wants you to look at his writing,” my mother said. “He says you’re the only child who’d give him an honest reading.”

“Yep, I’ll read it. I’m not sure how important honesty is to him anymore.”

Mom asked me to drop by the house and get the print-out from the mailbox. “He’d rather not hand it off in person,” she said. We agreed that I’d get it on my Friday visit, after they had cocktails and Dad showed me his clocks and grumbled about the neighbours.

Dad hand-wrote his story on yellow legal paper with an HB-2 pencil. He’d recently read a biography about William Styron and also Styron’s confession about his depression, “Visible Darkness”. He passed them on to me and I’d read them only because I wanted to avoid the guilt I’d feel if he died and I neglected the books, not fully participating in his life. Styron used yellow paper and a pencil, so I guess my father thought these writing tools might help him.

I poured a non-alcoholic beer and read the five pages mom left for me in the mailbox.

He heard a hard thump on the floor above. Muriel often stomped her feet on the second floor to get his attention or banged a broom on the basement ceiling.

He went to his office and made clocks and at five o'clock he mixed drinks in the kitchen.

"Muriel. Last call for the bar."

He mixed two Manhattans and sat in his kitchen chair, drizzling the burgundy elixir down his plaid shirt. He finished his drink and started a slow climb up the stairs.

He found Muriel on the floor, her face burrowed into the carpet, her arms at her side.

Bark scraped his wet tongue along Muriel's eyebrows.

He hobbled down the stairs and drank her Manhattan before phoning the hospital. It took three minutes to punch 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."

"We don't do that."

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

The 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 went to the basement to rummage through the storage boxes that Muriel 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 giggling about condom lessons in gym class.

Should he zip the bag closed? The hospital folks might want it open. He left her white face poking out; the zipper caught her neck on the skin that flowed like warm taffy.

"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. The second cocktail fortified him and he planned to have another after delivering her.

Half an hour later he got her into the trunk of the car, started the engine, backed into the quiet street, turned right at the main boulevard and took the four-lane avenue to the hospital. He knew the sequence well. Muriel drove the route weekly. He'd ride along with her, enjoying the time to imagine new characters for his script. At the hospital the doctor and nurses would check his blood pressure and asked him to answer questions befitting a five-year old. "I'm hardly going to forget the date," he told them. "I've got a month to give the studio the script." Muriel smiled and held his hand, a gesture of pride rather than comfort, he thought.

The hospital's emergency lights helped him find the 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. No one came out from the hospital. A light rain fell onto the windshield and teared down the glass.

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

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

“Stuart? Is everything alright?”

He disliked that one; she had false compassion. Making movies 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 shifted in their tiny seats 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?”

“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?”

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 heart was sprinting compared to the young man’s stroll.

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

Stuart released his wrist and looked around the 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 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.

He thought about Muriel in the trunk, how warm she was in the sleeping bag.

My bother Paul died on February 15, ten years ago. He’d severed himself from our family tree, announcing that he couldn’t tolerate Dad’s expectations; he finished his degree in physics and went off for a year to climb and hike across the country, chasing weather and warmth from one coast to another. He was still using the tent and sleeping bag assigned to him on our family camping trips, but he’d bought a new stove. He was found in his sleeping bag, his face ruddy from the carbon monoxide, his eyes closed. Dad said that Paul was too smart to leave a stove on in the tent, that he must have done it deliberately.

“You don’t study science for four years and forget the basics. He did this on purpose.”

My sister argued with him, insisting that Paul was not a coward and reminded Dad how many times he'd made his own mistakes. I thought maybe Paul could have done it, engineered his escape from life; he was ready, I guess, which is not much different than someone with terminal cancer asking for an assisted death. Paul had terminal disappointment, or non-operable sadness.

After I read the story I called mom.

“Mom, it's time to get some help. Or move into one of those nice retirement residences.”

“No. We're never leaving our home. Why can't you come over more often?”

“That's not good Mom. I have to work.”

“Two days a week is hardly working.”

“And I'm looking for other jobs on the other days. Looking for work is a full-time job.

And you know I'm allergic to Bark.”

She thought I was the consolation child.

“Your father is not here anymore. His soul is, but not the mind.”

“That's all you need Mom. Bring his soul with you, go somewhere new. Maybe to the coast.”

I opened my bag and took out a loonie.

“We can flip it now, mom. Heads you go to Halifax, tails you're off to Victoria.”

My sister would be pissed if they moved to B.C., she'd be angry at me for a month and probably when she did start talking again we'd speak about weather, but I'd follow them if they went. I'd go if a new story was possible. I'd volunteer and cross the line.