

THE BODY WASHER

by Rosemary FrisinoToohey

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SYNOPSIS

A young woman has been killed at a military checkpoint. Her death is seen through the eyes of three young women: the body washer who prepares her remains for burial, the soldier who fired the shot that killed her, and a reporter covering the war. They tell their stories in a series of interrupted monologues.

SETTING

A war zone in Afghanistan.

CHARACTERS

MARA.....female, 20s, Middle Eastern, a body washer. Accustomed to the daily stream of dead women's bodies brought in for ritual purification, Mara approaches her work with dignity, struggling to keep her private pain in check and praying for strength.

NIKKI.....female, 20s, Black, a soldier in the National Guard. Although she never expected to be deployed to a war zone, Nikki is trying hard to do her job and do it well. Her training and her love for her daughter back home keep her on an even keel.

AMY.....female, 20s, White, a reporter. Only a few years out of Journalism school, Amy is eager to justify her editor's decision to send her to Afghanistan before the US mission comes to an end. It is her ability to read people that makes her a good journalist.

TIME

2021 before the end of the US mission in Afghanistan.

Lights up on MARA, NIKKI & AMY.
MARA is at center.

MARA

Washing the bodies of the dead is a very important part of Islam. It is a purification and it's an honor to do it, to prepare the deceased for going to God. I have a feeling of accomplishment when the work is done. A sense of peace that comes after I have cleaned the body with water and soap, scented it with camphor, tied the shroud.

NIKKI

It was all about my education, you see. That's why I'm here. You know, join the National Guard a couple of years and get tuition money to get a degree. I want to make a better life for me and my little girl. Thought maybe I'd like to be a pharmacist. There's a big demand for them and they say there's always going to be a big demand. Of course, when I joined, I didn't think a lot about being sent here, so far away from home. But that's how it goes. Guard units from every state are here. In Iraq, too. All I can say is...it's tough.

MARA

The women of my family have been performing these rites for many years. My grandmother did it and then my mother before me. A body washer is prepared to see the old and the sick. That's expected. But the bad things, the brutal things we see now...

NIKKI

Some people here, they worry a lot about their kids. We all worry, of course---but I know Shawna is fine. She's with my mom. I'm very lucky in that. My mother is crazy about her and they get along really well. Shawna just started pre-school. She's very bright. I read to her...well, I was reading to her every single night.

AMY

In Journalism school we learned that the easiest way into a story is to start with the facts and figures. And when you're focusing on military conflicts, there are a lot of numbers to talk about. The US combat mission ended in Iraq years ago, but hundreds of US troops are still there and will likely stay there indefinitely in advisory roles. It's a different story here in Afghanistan. Later this year, before the end of 2021, all US troops will go home. Why am I here? My editor wants stories about the beginning of the end in Afghanistan.

MARA

The rules are very clear. If the deceased is a male, then only men should wash him. If the deceased is a woman, only females should wash her. For a child, either men or women may do the washing. According to Islamic rite, burial should take place within twenty-four hours of death. But the way things are, that's not always possible. By the time the police found this woman's family, we didn't get the body until late in the day.

NIKKI

Shawna has every one of my letters stuck up on the wall behind her bed. At first, my mom didn't want to let her do it. You know, she was thinking of the wallpaper I put up. I got it done just before I left, it's really cute, all flower gardens and bunnies. Pink, of course. Shawna loves pink. I guess maybe all little girls love pink.

AMY

If you're talking about war, any war, the biggest numbers are always the fatalities. The US military has lost twenty-four hundred troops in Afghanistan and more than forty-five hundred in Iraq. As far as civilian deaths, it's a given that at least two hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have died since the war began in 2003. Here in Afghanistan, sixty-six thousand Afghan troops have been killed, along with forty-eight thousand civilians. But practically everybody agrees that both those figures are way below the real numbers. Whatever the reality, the bottom line is...every death is huge...to somebody.

NIKKI

With most of us, the talk is about the people we love back home. Like Tara's little boy. He won a blue ribbon for running a race at school. So we put together a big card with a blue ribbon on it, and we all signed it. "To Tara, a blue-ribbon mother." She cried.

MARA

In the mornings they bring the bodies of those who have died of illness, of old age. But by the middle of the day the vans and the trucks come in with the others, the ones who have been shot, the victims of bombings. There is so much dirt, so much blood, and often, so much that is gone. I do the best I can with what is left.

AMY

Of course, a good reporter is supposed to go beyond the numbers. My job is to find the real stories and send them back home. My Mom said to me before I left, "You're going on a journey, Amy, but don't let it change you. Come back the same girl you are." Too late, Mom. You look at all this over here, no way you don't change. No possible way.

MARA

My friend thinks I should find another job. Mara, she says, isn't it upsetting to see these things, to deal with all of this day after day? She's right of course. It is. But I tell myself, if not me, who will do it? Who will make these women whole?

NIKKI

When Shawna grows up, I'm going to see to it that she gets an education, a good education so she can get herself a good job. You better believe I am never, ever going to let her do anything like this. I am going to knock myself out to make sure she doesn't need to join any National Guard to pay for her college. Nothing is worth this. Nobody on earth can pay me enough to do what I did yesterday. But I signed up, I put my name, Nikki Jordan, on that line. So, here I am.

AMY

Most days, I follow the patrols as they leave camp and head out for their checkpoints on one of the roads leading into the city. When the cars approach, I can almost feel these soldiers tense up. There's a kind of rigidity that seems to take hold. Of course, when you talk to them, they all say the same thing. They're just doing their job.

MARA

The hardest part is dealing with the families. Like the mother who came in with her daughter's body yesterday. The girl had died of a very bad head wound. The family arrived here with the body but the mother refused to leave. She wanted to wash the daughter herself, so we did it together. I wanted her to cry, to shed tears over her dead child. It would have made it easier. At least for me. But she didn't.

NIKKI

A lot of what we did in the Guard before we came over here, it was all about forging a team, making us a unit. We heard that over and over again in training. You know, we're bonded, welded together. Like sisters and brothers. Close. Really close.

AMY

The routine is the same with every car. Whether it's one old man in a beat-up wreck, or an open truck with seventeen guys, all of the papers have to be looked at, all of the bags inspected. It's tedious work but it's a nervous kind of tedium.

MARA

I begin the washing by preparing the water. It must be lukewarm, not hot, since that would cause discomfort to the deceased.

NIKKI

The way we work it at the checkpoints, two of us stand on the road, one checking the driver, the other, the passenger side. The other two are up on the tank, watching for any kind of movement, anything that says, this one's carrying insurgents, or maybe somebody with a bomb. And we're always on the alert. We're looking, we're just looking so hard. My eyes ache sometimes.

AMY

A war zone is crazy, though, whether it's here in Afghanistan or somewhere else. And my sense of things is that there's a sameness about it all. And there's something...something horrible in that sameness. That's why I decided to focus on the story of one young woman.

MARA

When they bring the body in, I pull away, sometimes I have to cut away what's left of the clothing. But it is part of the ritual that the washer says nothing about the body of the deceased.

NIKKI

So Ryan's looking into the car. Checking the papers, the I.D.'s. Are they who they say they are? Cyndi, she's on the passenger side. Jake and I are up on the tank.

AMY

Her family lived on the outskirts of the city to the east. The mother said the daughter had come to town to register for classes. The university had just opened enrollment to women and the daughter wanted very much to go, to get her degree.

NIKKI

Cyndi was standing back from the car, her gun trained on the guy in the passenger seat. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ryan jump back.

MARA

I wind a cloth around my hand to clean away the impurities and I begin by saying, Bismallah, in the name of Allah.

NIKKI

All of a sudden, she was just there. Like out of nowhere. This figure in a veil. I'm not even sure which direction she came from. You could tell she was young.

AMY

She had just turned twenty. Her name was Khalila.

MARA

I wash the hair and braid it in three braids, placing them behind the back of the deceased.

NIKKI

Now, Ryan is a big guy, and he's holding an M-16, locked, loaded, aiming right at her. But she just keeps coming. She keeps on walking toward him. Why would somebody do that? Why would you, how could you walk into that? Man...

AMY

I interviewed the mother but she didn't have a lot to say. Then I got to talk to the younger sister. Sixteen years old. That's when I heard a mouthful.

MARA

I clean the teeth and the nasal passages with a wet cloth.

NIKKI

Now, I don't know why, but Ryan's just standing there. Like he couldn't do it. Or he wouldn't do it. I don't know.

AMY

The sister is a real beauty, deep brown eyes, gorgeous long lashes, clear, caramel-colored skin. And then she launches into this tirade about how everything that happens over here is our fault. The US, she says, is to blame for everything.

MARA

With powdered soap and the water I have prepared, I wash the upper parts of the body before the lower ones, and always the right side is done before the left.

NIKKI

I'm thinking, why doesn't Ryan shoot her? Why doesn't he just take her out? What's he waiting for? Why in the name of Christ is he waiting?

MARA

The head and the upper body must be raised slightly to make sure that any exudations from the body flow down and do not run back onto the body.

NIKKI

Ryan's doing nothing, it's like he's frozen. And her? She just keeps coming, straight at him, she keeps on coming.

AMY

The US doesn't care, the sister says. Americans don't care who we are and they don't care who they kill. They just want to own everything and control everything so they can drive their big cars and live in their fancy houses.

MARA

Special care must be taken with the private parts. If the woman is in her menstrual period or having childbirth bleeding, padding is used to prevent the blood from leaving the body.

NIKKI

What could I do? What the hell was I supposed to do?

AMY

It was so strange, this sixteen-year-old kid, this beautiful young thing in an abaya, filled with such hate, such venom for America and all things American.

NIKKI

I fired. I had to.

MARA

It is preferable, of course, to wash the body three, five, even seven times. But if there is a shortage of water, then the entire body must be washed at least once.

AMY

I asked her how she felt about her sister being shot down at a checkpoint. That's when those beautiful dark eyes looked right through me. She said she wished Khalila had been carrying a bomb.

NIKKI

I told myself, afterwards I need to ask Ryan, why he didn't shoot her, what stopped him. Was it because she was young? Because she had a pretty face?

AMY

And that would make you happy? To know that your sister killed herself? Well, if she did, she said, she'd have taken those soldiers with her.

NIKKI

So I was going to ask him, but then I figured...what difference does it make? What the hell is the difference? If it was my bullets or his that stopped her. It's all the same.

AMY

What about you, I said. Would you do it? Would you blow yourself up? Yes, she said. If I could take Americans with me. You can bet I got out of there pretty fast after that.

NIKKI

The thing is, that girl could have had something under that veil. She didn't. We found out later this one just had some prayer beads. But that's the thing. We don't know. We never know. You can't tell with these people.

MARA

As we washed her daughter's body, the mother spoke to her. Khalila, she said, this is wrong. You should be washing me. Children should bury their parents. But in war, parents bury their children.

AMY

Today I'm back to focusing on the numbers. It's a lot easier to write about numbers than about a teenager with a death wish.

NIKKI

This is a crazy place all right, everything's crazy. And not one of us wants to be here. So far away from home.

MARA

In the final wash, I use camphor to perfume the water. Then, the body is dried with a clean towel and wrapped in a shroud. Finally, the body is covered in plastic and wrapped once again. On the final shroud are written words from the Koran.

AMY

It's much simpler to think about statistics than some kid with suicide on her mind and murder in her heart.

NIKKI

Every day I tell myself, Nikki, all you're doin' is your job. You're just doin' your job.

MARA

The work is difficult, but I pray that I can continue. Someone must. As long as the trucks keep bringing the bodies, today, tomorrow, the day after that...

AMY

Better to focus on numbers than on a woman of twenty, shot dead at a checkpoint.

NIKKI

That's all this is. That's why I'm here. I'm just...doin' my goddamn job.

MARA

Perhaps I stay because I am like them...these women they bring on the trucks. There is a saying...I, too, have a dead heart.

Lights slowly down.

END OF PLAY