

*The Body Washer* excerpt

NIKKI

There we were that day. Ryan was looking into the car. Checking the papers, the I.D.'s. Are they who they say they are? Cyndi was on the passenger side. Jake and I were up on the tank.

AMY

The mother said her 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

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 right 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 much 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.

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NIKKI

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

AMY

The sister was a real beauty, deep brown eyes, gorgeous long lashes, clear, caramel-colored skin. And right after we started talking, she launched into this tirade about how everything that happened over there was our fault. The US, she said, was 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 remember 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

But Ryan was doing nothing, it was like he was frozen. And her? She just kept coming, straight at him, she kept on coming.

AMY

Americans don't care, the sister said. They 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?

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AMY

It was so strange, so awful, to hear 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. And those 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 was pretty?

AMY

Would that make you happy, I asked her, 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 did it make? What the hell was 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 that? Would you blow yourself up? Yes, she said. If I could take Americans with me. I got out of there pretty fast after that.

NIKKI

The thing is, that girl could have had something under her veil. She didn't. We found out later she just had some prayer beads. But that was the thing. We didn't know. We never knew. You couldn't tell with those people.

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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 the children.

AMY

Now I'm looking back at everything I wrote while I was over there. There are always the facts and the figures. And of course, it's easier to write about all that, than about a teenager with a death wish.

NIKKI

It was a crazy place all right, everything was crazy. And not one of us wanted to be there. 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 simpler to think about numbers rather than some kid with suicide on her mind and murder in her heart. And what about her sister?

NIKKI

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

MARA

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

AMY

I can add everything up, but how do I make sense of it? A woman not yet twenty-one, shot dead at a checkpoint. Where do I put that in the equation? I don't know. And I don't know if I'll ever know.

NIKKI

That's all it was. That's why I was there. That's what it was all about. I was just doin' my goddamn job.