

The Secret Keeper

By David Meyers

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CHARACTERS

FARIBA, late 30s, deeply hurt and angry at the world

AHMAD, 50s, calm and serene

SETTING

A barren graveyard in Afghanistan. The present.

THE SECRET KEEPER

A barren graveyard. Afghanistan.

No headstones or plaques. Mounds of dirt serve as unmarked graves.

Silence. Stillness.

After a few beats, FARIBA (late 30s) enters, wearing a black burqa. She's tentative, nervous.

She looks around cautiously to make sure no one else is present. Then she drops to her knees and begins examining the graves.

AHMAD (50s) enters and observes her for a few beats. Then:

AHMAD

Can I help you?

Fariba falls back, surprised.

AHMAD

I'm sorry, I didn't mean / to frighten-

FARIBA

Get away from me.

AHMAD

I'm sorry. I-

FARIBA

Get away!

AHMAD

(pause)

You don't even know me.

FARIBA

Anyone who visits this place, I don't want to know.

Ahmad looks at her calmly.

AHMAD
(a soothing tone)

You're here.

FARIBA

That's different. I-

She stops herself. Then she gets up, and begins to leave.

AHMAD

I'm not a visitor. I work here.

She stops. Pause.

FARIBA

You bury them?

Ahmad nods.

AHMAD

Yes.

FARIBA

That's horrible.

AHMAD

...it can be.

FARIBA

Even when they're in pieces, you...?

AHMAD

Yes.

FARIBA

And you cleanse the body? The pieces?

Ahmad nods.

Pause. She looks at him.

FARIBA

Why?

AHMAD

Because it is my job.

(pause)

No one claims the bodies. Many don't have families.

FARIBA

They don't have families? Or their families are too ashamed?

Ahmad doesn't answer; it's probably the latter.

FARIBA

They don't deserve this.

AHMAD

Every child of Allah deserves to be buried.

FARIBA

They're not children. They're monsters.

AHMAD

He makes us all. The good and the bad.

FARIBA

I disagree.

AHMAD

(friendly)

Then we can agree to disagree.

He smiles. She looks at him. Pause.

Ahmad gestures to the pile of dirt where Fariba was digging.

AHMAD

Are you looking for something?

FARIBA

The graves - they're not marked.

AHMAD

Yes they are.

Where?
FARIBA
Ahmad points to his head.

Up here.
AHMAD

You? You remember where they're buried?
FARIBA
Ahmad nods. Fariba balks.

There must be hundreds.
FARIBA

112 since I started. Eight years ago.
AHMAD
(pause)
Are you looking for someone?

No - no.
FARIBA

So you just came to browse?
AHMAD

Yes.
FARIBA

Strange for someone who thinks they don't deserve to be buried.
AHMAD
Pause. Fariba looks at him, decides to engage.

Anwar Maradi.
FARIBA
Ahmad processes it in his brain for a second,
then he gestures to a nearby grave.

He is there.
AHMAD

Fariba looks at Ahmad. Then she reluctantly brings herself to Maradi's grave. She looks at it for a moment, a pained expression on her face.

FARIBA

You know what he did?

AHMAD

Of course. That's why he's buried here.

FARIBA

No - I mean his attack, what *he* did.

Ahmad pauses, processes it for a second.

AHMAD

The market? Two years ago?

FARIBA

Yes.

AHMAD

28 victims.

FARIBA
(correcting him)

23.

AHMAD

Ah.

Pause. Fariba looks at the grave. Ahmad watches her.

FARIBA

Didn't it bother you to bury him? Knowing what he did?

AHMAD

I don't think about what they do.

FARIBA

How can you not?

AHMAD

It's how I manage. I become sad when people cut down a tree, let alone kill each other.

FARIBA

Then how can you bury them?

AHMAD

I look at them as people. People who were full of hope.

FARIBA

Someone who blows up a market, or children playing soccer - they're full of hope?

AHMAD

Yes - once.

FARIBA

When?

AHMAD

When they were children, perhaps. When their parents loved them.

FARIBA

The victims - they have parents, too. Parents who loved them - who raised them better than that...

Pause. Ahmad looks at her compassionately.

AHMAD

Your child? He was victim?

FARIBA

She. Habiza. She was eleven. I sent her to the market for spices. Cardamon, salt...

AHMAD

I am sorry for your loss.

FARIBA

Thank you.

An awkward pause.

AHMAD

May I ask...

Fariba nods.

AHMAD

If you feel so strongly about these men, the bombers - why did you come?

FARIBA

I don't know. I wanted to see.

AHMAD

And your husband - he allows...?

FARIBA

He doesn't know.

(pause)

Ever since she died, I'm so angry. All the time. At my husband, my children. The world.

(she stops herself)

Do you have children?

AHMAD

...no.

Fariba stands up, goes to him.

FARIBA

To lose them, is the worst thing on Earth...

(gesturing to the grave)

I thought that maybe if I came, if I saw him, it might make a difference.

AHMAD

Has it?

FARIBA

No. She's still gone...

Pause. They stay with each other for a moment.

FARIBA

How do you bear this? The pain, the suffering?

AHMAD

It's very calm. And it makes me live my life better.

(gesturing to the dirt)

To realize, in the end, this is all we are.

FARIBA

Isn't it depressing?

AHMAD

No. There are many jokes.

Fariba almost laughs.

FARIBA

Jokes? Here?

AHMAD

Whenever there is an attack, my coworkers gather at my desk. They say:
(trying to deliver a joke)

“Ahmad, get ready, there is another attack!”

Pause.

FARIBA

That doesn't sound funny.

AHMAD

We've been at war 30 years. Humor is how I survive.

FARIBA

No. I mean, what you described - it doesn't sound funny. “Get ready, there is another attack”?

AHMAD

For the Afghan government, this is high humor.

They share a smile. A beat.

Then Fariba begins to leave.

FARIBA

I'm sorry I wasted your time-

AHMAD

Oh, not a waste. It is nice to spend time with the living.

FARIBA

Yes. I don't suppose you get much of that here.

AHMAD

As-salam alaykum.

FARIBA

Wa alaykum asalam.

Fariba starts to exit, but then she turns back to Ahmad.

FARIBA
Can I invite you for tea?

AHMAD
I don't think that would be appropriate.

FARIBA
With my husband of course. And my family.

AHMAD
I would not be welcome at your home.

FARIBA
Don't be silly. I insist.

AHMAD
No - you wouldn't want me.

Ahmad cuts himself off. Now Fariba is interested.

FARIBA
Why not?

AHMAD
Nothing. As-salam alaykum.

FARIBA
No - tell me.

AHMAD
I don't think / that would be a good idea-

FARIBA
Why? Why wouldn't I want you?

Pause. Ahmad looks at her, decides to tell her.

AHMAD
If you knew why I am here. Why I do this.

FARIBA
You told me - because everyone deserves to be buried.

AHMAD

No.

(pause)

Because my son deserved to be buried.

Fariba looks at him, confused.

FARIBA

You said you didn't have any children.

AHMAD

I don't. Not since that day - eight years ago.

Fariba's eyes grow wide as she pieces it together.

FARIBA

Your son. He...?

AHMAD

No one would bury him. They wanted him to rot.

(pause)

But I raised him. Well. And I loved him. Still. Even after what he did.

(pause)

So now I bury the bombers for their parents. For the ones who can't bear to acknowledge, to forgive...

A beat.

AHMAD

So: would you still like to invite me for tea?

Pause.

Fariba and Ahmad look at each other. For the first time, the anger begins to drain from her eyes.

FARIBA

Yes.

A beat.

END OF PLAY