

READING THE QURAN ON 911

By John Reid Currie

SCENE 1

TIME: 10:00 AM September 11 2016

PLACE: The interior of an 2009 Toyota Corolla driving through Pennsylvania farmland

AT RISE: Mary, a 92 year old Scottish woman and her son Neil are sitting in the backseat. On the radio, the reading of names and occasionally the sound of bells as the annual ceremony commemorating the World Trade Center attacks progresses. Neil, Mary's son, sits next to her with a food cooler and a backpack between them. Meg, Neil's girlfriend is driving.

MEG

(On her cellphone) I finished the necklace last week and will ship it to you Monday when I get back to Queens.

NEIL

Meg, I don't want you on the phone if you're driving.

MEG

It's a client. (back to her call) It should leave New York Tuesday afternoon and get to you by Friday morning. Let me know what you think. If you like the pattern, I can make matching earrings or a bracelet. Ok my dear, I'll call you Monday afternoon to confirm.

NEIL

(To Mary) Well Hen! Nae worries! Nae worries Hen... (He pinches his mother's cheek, looks in the cooler and pulls out a bag of orange slices from the cooler) We're going home now. (He feeds her) Here mum. Have a wee bit of orange.

MARY

Aye, that's good. (the car is silent but for the chewing of the orange and the reading of the names on the radio) Are we goin home?

NEIL

In a few hours we'll be back. (beat) Yes Mum, we're going home.

MARY

Aye. (She breathes deeply and sighs. They continue on in silence as the names continue)

NEIL

(Under his breath) Oh my Lord in Heaven. Oh my Lord in Heaven.

MARY

(Mary reaches for Neil's hand and brings it to her lips, kissing his hand) My baby, my wee baby... (she rocks back and forth and they stay like this for some time)

NEIL

Oh my Lord in Heaven. Oh my Lord in Heaven (he repeats and repeats)

(Neil reaches into his backpack, pulls out a book of family photos and a Quran; He gives his mother the photos and begins reading the Quran.)

MEG

You need to stop.

NEIL

What?

MEG

All this praying. Now you're reading that god-damned book!

NEIL

What? Just like the Gospels or Buddhism.

MEG

You need to stop! I hear you in your sleep. You pray incessantly. All night. You pray to yourself, to Jesus, not to Allah. (beat) This has nothing to do with you Neil. You didn't do anything. You were in the building. You were going to work. You survived. You didn't do anything. You think you'd be better off if you were a martyr? If we were married— I'd be a widow. Think I'd be better off. Think your mother would be better off? It was 15 years ago Neil. You need to stop. We need to re-build our life here, now, in New Jersey.

(Meg turns off the radio)

NEIL

I asked you to respect my thoughts about this.

MEG (getting angry)

What am I supposed to do, wait for you to convert? Then what? I'm your little infidel and you're what, renewed? You need people Neil, not God. You need people!

NEIL

Enough Meg! (in a projection behind them a side by side text of Arabic and English translation of Sura 19 of the Quran appears. Neil Reads from the Quran)

Maryam. In the name of Allah, most benevolent, most merciful... KAF HA YA Ain Sad

MARY

Maryam. That's Mary...that's my name.

BLACKOUT

SCENE 2

TIME: 5:00 PM Two weeks later.

PLACE: North Jersey—a living room, attached dining room, half painted, with a ladder, paint cans, brushes and rollers laid out on a drop cloth. Mary's bedroom upstage right. There is a canary yellow rotary phone on a phone table next to the entrance of the living room. A Victorian water pitcher and washbowl is on a stand, downstage left, A number of empty beer bottles, a vape machine, marijuana, and a large ashtray cover a coffee table. The room has begun to acquire a number of Middle Eastern paintings and numerous photographs of the World Trade Center. Neil's bedroom is offstage left.

AT RISE: Mary is in her bedroom sitting in a wheelchair. She is half-asleep, occasionally snoring, crying and talking to herself. There is a "baby" monitor on a bedside table. In the living room, a cd plays suras from the Quran and a radio broadcasts news about the 2016 presidential election. Neil enters from the side-yard, wiping dirt from his hands on a pair of red corduroy work pants. He has a "baby" monitor receiver clipped to his belt.

NEIL

(smelling his hands as he crosses through the room) I don't mind the onion grass. (yelling into Mary's bedroom) What can I tell you.... it's rustic! (The phone rings) Christ!... Hello? (he slams the phone down) Idiots.

MARY

(coughs and coughs) Who was that?

NEIL

A robocall.

MARY

Who?

NEIL

A wrong number. I'm nearly finished with the yard. We'll be in great shape once spring finally kicks in. I've planted Siberian Iris, 6 different hostas and a bunch more day lilies and phlox. (His cellphone rings) Neil's Paint and Gardens. Jack! How's it going? Right. Sure. I'll be in town this afternoon. I was hoping to start tomorrow if that works for you. Sure, not a problem, I can come by tonight. That's fine. We can say seven without worry. Ok. Ok. Thanks for calling Jack. (he hangs up). (He walks over to the work area and runs his hand over the creaks and patches on the wall) I should have done this years ago. Twice as much work now with all the cracks in the plaster. (His cellphone rings) Neil's Paints and Gardens. Yes, Mr. Ortiz sir. I apologize. I had to leave town at the last minute. I, I, the job will be done on time. I'm hiring a second so we can get it done. I'm sorry, Mr. Ortiz, it couldn't be helped. I understand. We'll get it done. I'll get it done. See you Friday morning as planned. No worries. (to himself) Fuck if I know when it'll be done. (The doorbell rings. He answers the door) What? You ringing the bell now?

MEG

I won't be long. I have to get back to Forest Hills. Anyway, I just need to get a few things from the bedroom.

NEIL

Fine.

MEG

How's she doing?

NEIL

Fine. She's still up if you want to say hello.

MEG

Say hello?

NEIL

Sorry, you know what I mean.

MEG

Right. (over the baby monitor you can hear Mary laughing to herself). I don't want to get her going. It's fine.

NEIL

Fine. (beat) Meg...

MARY

And Daddy. Daddy sang to me... only, only! when he had a drink in 'im. Otherwise, he was naewhere to be found. He'd show up on 'is own time, like the back end of a coo. Once, I was 4 maybe 5. I had on a wee, white sun dress. Lovely. He came back to the flat where I stayed wi my Auntie Maggie and took my claethes. Walked doon to the edge of the Clyde and lit 'em up. Threw them ablaze into the river. "Ye'll never leave me now lassie, will ye?" he says. I don't know what the matter was but the next day, my auntie took me to Sauchiehall street and bought me three new frocks. She bought me bread and jam and sweets. My daddy stayed away for a long time. Nae worries Hen, nae worries Hen, he used to say. (she laughs, stops talking, and quiets down)

MEG

Who's she talking about?

NEIL

She started this a few days ago, talking about Grander and his half-assed drunk parenting. I don't know if it's because I stopped her Lexapro or what. Who knows? (Neil and Meg look at each other as Mary continues to mumble to herself)

(this is difficult for Neil) Meg? Meg...I can't...you should leave Meg. I need to be alone, for now. I need time to sorts things out. To be still. To be mindful. To get clean, I don't know, I need something I can't see. Mohammed, the prophets, Jesus all took comfort in solitude.

MEG

Solitude? Neil, you're a landscaper in New Jersey.

NEIL

You know before I could read and write, my mother told me stories every night, and told me to see as far as I could, through the trees in the back. And I'd look out over the meadowlands, east, past the City and everything I could see, everything beyond what I could see, below me, all around me, was God. She said, I was surrounded by God. By God's love, It's the same when a Muslim child's born, the child's father whispers in the child's ear, Allahu Akbar; (beat) it's the same. Every mother wants the same. Every father wants the same. To protect their children with God and from God. (Silence) Please go.

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MEG

This is it? (pause) I'm at sea Neil! Fifteen years I'm with you! (pleading) I stayed with you. For you! For you, Neil.

NEIL

Can you please leave?

MEG (angry)

You're a lost baby Neil. I'll be back for all my things. (Meg leaves)

NEIL

(Neil goes to the water pitcher and pours water into the washbowl A projection appears showing instructions in Arabic for cleansing, ablution and rules for daily Islamic prayer. He takes off his shirt and begins to wash himself.

MARY

Who is my shepherd? weel I ken,
The Lord Himsel' is he;
He leeds me whaur the grass is green
An' the still waters be.

Often times I fain astray, would go
An' wann'r far awa';
He fin's me oot, He puts me right,
An brings me hame an' a'.

Tho' I pass through the valley o the dead,
Fin' I ken He is near;
His rod and staff will me defen',
Sae I ha'e nocht to fear.

All the comfort I could need,
His thochtfu' care provides;
Tho' wolves an' dogs may prowl about,
In safety me he hides.

His guidness an' His mercy both
Nae doubt will bide wi' me
while faulded on the fields o' time,
Or o' eternity.*

(The sound of the water ripples as Neil cleanses himself)

(Lights fade)

End of Play

*A Scots owresettin o Dauvid's Saum
(John Moir)