

David w. Rintels, *Not Without My Daughter*, USA, 1991

Reviewed by **Abby Bundi**

The movie was written by David W. Rintels and directed by Brian Gilbert. It is based on the true story of Betty Mahmoody, an ordinary American woman married to an Iranian doctor working at a local hospital. They have a young daughter and a settled middle-class life, but beneath the surface, all is not well. In 1984, against her better judgment, Mrs. Mahmoody went to Iran with her husband and their small daughter, Mahtob, for a two-week visit with his family. The movie unfolds from the point of view of Betty, who is shown surrounded by harsh, cruel religious fanatics who seem to have anything but her best interests at heart. The film stars Sally Field as Betty and Alfred Molina as her husband Moody

Moody suffers from racist taunts at the hospital and grows homesick when he calls his family back in Iran. He finally suggests a visit to his homeland which Betty is not sure about. She reads about the unrest in Iran and he is not sure of her welcome. Moody promises her on the Koran that she has nothing to fear. But soon after they land in Iran, she is plunged into a frightening and alien world. Upon arriving in Tehran, Betty is put off by the noise, the congestion, the loud relatives and the strangeness of the culture. More than that, she's reluctant to wear the traditional Islamic garb worn by Iranian women, which she eventually gives into after being informed that she'll be arrested if she doesn't comply.

As a woman, she is an occasion of sin. It is forbidden for her to reveal so much as a strand of hair in public. The other members of her husband's family make little effort to communicate with her, other than to give her orders or repeat religious truths. They are interested in her only as the mother of her husband's child; her role, it appears, is to be the infidel mother of an Islamic daughter.

At first Moody is supportive. However, as the visit continues, Moody becomes increasingly quick-tempered and short with her. On the day that they are scheduled to return to America, he surprises both his wife and daughter, by informing them that they are not going back at all. He has lost his

job at the hospital and plans to stay in Iran permanently. Betty is adamant about leaving but is forced to stay together with their daughter, as she is his wife and must obey him.

The movie then plunges us into a world of Islamic fundamentalism, which it depicts in shrill terms as one of the men who beat their wives, of a religion that honours women by depriving them of what in the West would be considered basic human rights, of women who are willing or unwilling captives of their men. No attempt is intentionally made, to explain the Muslim point of view, except in rigid sets of commands and statements. No Muslim character is depicted in a favourable light and the local people who end up helping Betty are dissidents or outlaws. With Israel, of all places, standing in for Iran, the film manages to strongly convey how strange and disagreeable a truly alien culture can be to an average woman. The biggest problem is Moody's abrupt transition from a sensitive husband to a violent tyrant.

Betty decides to combine faith with action. Even though she is confined to the house with everyone's watchful eye upon her, she manages a secret trip to the Swiss embassy, only to learn that she cannot be freed. On a subsequent excursion into town, Betty learns if she gets a divorce, she can leave, but without her daughter. She is unfortunately caught and suffers a beating and death threat from her husband, who had become a completely different man since their arrival in Iran, despite this Betty gathers her resolve and prays again to the Lord for help.

After nearly two years of staggering suffering, Betty finally manages to contact an underground of helpful Iranians who offer to smuggle her and her daughter into Turkey. Knowing that her chances of escape are minuscule, Betty conforms to her husband's commands in order to gain Moody's trust. Watched by Moody's sister, Betty convinces him that they should move out of her home and into Mammal's home. By chance, during a trip to the marketplace, she meets a sympathetic storekeeper who allows her to use his telephone and overhears her conversations with the Swiss Embassy. He puts her in contact with a pair of humanitarian Iranians, Hossein and his sister, who offer to help Betty and Mahtob return to the United States. Betty accepts Hossein's assistance, especially after he warns her that Mahtob, who is nine, could be at risk of being forced into marriage or drafted into the military as a child soldier.

Mahtob does not adjust to her new Iranian school and has to be accompanied to school by Betty. The women at the school tell Betty that they sympathize with her, and though they will not allow her to use the telephone, they allow her to bring Mahtob to school hours after she would normally arrive. Betty uses this time to meet with Hossein, and they discuss an escape route. One day, when she and Mahtob arrive at school, Moody is there waiting for them and attacks her in front of Mahtob. She leaves with Moody but flees when he is distracted. She finds a telephone booth and calls a woman from the Swiss embassy whom she had spoken with previously. They return to the school but the women from the school forbid her from taking Mahtob. With no other options, Betty and Mahtob return home with Moody.

The plan becomes complicated when Betty learns that her father is seriously ill and may be dying. Moody tells Betty he will allow her to return to see her dying father but will not let Mahtob go with her. He tells Betty while she is in the United States, she is to liquidate their assets and return to Iran. Hossein warns Betty that if she visits her father, she may never see Mahtob again. Betty decides to wait to return to the United States with Mahtob. Moody unknowingly foils her plans by having her booked on a flight several days early, thanks to his relatives' contacts in the airport.

Betty eventually gets what seems to be her last chance to escape when Moody is suddenly called to the clinic for an emergency. On the pretence of going to buy presents for her father, Betty takes Mahtob and they contact Hossein, who manages to supply Betty and Mahtob with fake identity documents, and they make their way past the checkpoint with Iranian smugglers.

Despite the difficult and very dangerous journey, Betty and Mahtob are eventually dropped off in a street in Ankara, Turkey; where they see the flag of the American Embassy in the distance. The film's end title cards reveal that Betty and Mahtob eventually made it back home to the United States, and Betty became a successful author and dedicates herself to helping those in need.

The movie opens us up to a world where family ties are jeopardized by religious and cultural differences and a visit that was expected to be a blessing turns out to be more of a curse. I think the movie should be seen because it is an invitation to thought. It is an opportunity for testing our own prejudices and our own sense of fairness.



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