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The First Little Mosque on the Prairie

A Canadianized version of Islam once flourished out west. Can it take root again?

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illustration by Graham Roumieu

I am praying. Sort of. My eyes are cast downward, hands held apart, palms up and slightly cupped, as if holding open an invisible book. That this is not going well is hardly a surprise. It has been a long time, and truth be told I was never shown how to do it properly. My stance is awkward and imitative, a cheap copy of what I have witnessed at the odd solemn occasion that intersected our lives. The last time I tried to pray was more than ten years ago, in Istanbul. It was at the Blue Mosque, a structure so indescribably beautiful, so clearly a tribute to humankind's transcendence, that its existence seemed to render less significant the promise of the divine.

This place of worship is spare. The pulpit, as it were, is off to the side of the rectangular room. Next to the main hall is an antechamber for ritual ablutions, containing a wash basin and jug perched atop a simple wishbone cabinet. A curtain separating the men's prayer area from the women's is not evident today, though one was once erected, many years after both sexes, blissfully ignorant of — or perhaps unconcerned with — tradition, had begun praying together. Rugs cover the hardwood; most are worn thin in spots, perhaps where foreheads met floor. Wind whistles through the building. An eerie wail breaks the silence. I am completely alone here — although to the faithful there is no such thing.

This, the original Al Rashid Mosque, is essentially a museum now, its congregation limited to tour bus voyeurs who, having had their fill of Fort Edmonton's sexier sites, poke their heads through the front doors and wonder how a mosque, of all things, figured in the early history of northern Alberta. Built in 1938 and relocated in 1991 to a berth in the city's premier historical park, it is the oldest Muslim house of worship in Canada. From the outside, however, it hardly looks like a mosque at all. Instead, its design evokes the early-twentieth-century Ukrainian Orthodox churches that dot central Alberta's rural landscape. This is not a coincidence: the mosque's contractor, Mike Drewoth, was a Ukrainian Canadian unfamiliar with Islamic architecture.

In his ignorance, though, Drewoth accomplished something far more meaningful than any aesthetic flourish. Although clearly unintended, his fusion of East and West stands as a metaphor for a made-in-Canada Islam, a pliant and less conservative version of the faith that grew out of the western prairie like a field of tall grass. It was an Islam that forgave the odd trespass and contextualized some of the religion's more rigid proscriptions as remnants from the past. It was practised here.

Near the entrance, I pick up a book titled *Muslims in Canada: A Century of Achievement*. It is a textual and photographic record of the early community, their assimilation reflected in the names they had adopted or that were chosen for them. Leafing through its pages, I note that Bedouin Ferran became Peter Baker, while Ali Ahmed Abouchadi and Mahamud Abuali Gotmi were christened Alexander Hamilton and Frank Alex Coutney, respectively. And so on. On one page, however, was a list of clearly Muslim names, direct from the old country, thirty-two in all. These were the founders of Al Rashid, its charter congregation.

One name stands out, initially because of its length: Rikia Mahmoud Saeed el Haj Ahmed. She was known to me, but not by this ostentatious designation. I knew her as Mary Saddy, my grandmother.

Memories of my father's funeral are hazy, but a few details remain. We decided to have the ceremony at a funeral home instead of the mosque, since the vast majority of my father's friends were non-Muslim. As the only son, I was asked to help prepare his body for burial, a role I declined because it would have been too painful to fulfill. There was, I recall, some minor wrangling over how Dad would ascend to the hereafter. My immediate family thought it would be fine to dress him in the clothes in which he was most comfortable — white sports shirt, tennis shorts and running shoes — but my uncle felt that those who had agreed to prepare my father's body would not approve. So Dad was wrapped in a *kafan*, a simple white sheet, for his final journey.

We also had a difficult time choosing a photograph to place beside the casket. In his more recent photos, the lung cancer that eventually raced through him seemed to have altered his face long before any actual symptoms appeared. In many shots, it looked as though he was forcing his smile, as though death was stalking him and subconsciously he knew it. We had to go back to a trip he and my mother took to Japan several years earlier to unearth a good photograph. Two things had to be Photoshopped out first, though. One was my mother. The other was the large can of beer in his hand.

The first trickle of Muslim immigration to North America began in the last three decades of the nineteenth century, primarily from Ottoman-occupied Greater Syria, a region that included Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. Most of the early immigrants were single men; many, like my paternal grandfather, were teens from villages in present-day Lebanon's Bekaa Valley who were fleeing conscription into the Ottoman army. The majority of the initial Arab émigrés settled in Montreal; some of the more intrepid went west.

Of these, many were peddlers who travelled throughout rural Saskatchewan and Alberta, hawking wares they carried on their backs. Others were drawn to the north. My maternal grandfather, Bud Alley (formerly Mohammed Khalil Ali Nogedi), became a trader in the small, primarily First Nations outpost of Fort Simpson, NWT, where his competition was the Hudson's Bay Company. My father's family ended up in Alberta, helming a mixed farming operation in the south for a while, before settling in Edmonton in the mid-1930s. The 1931 census put the number of Muslims in Canada at 645. If that was accurate, my father's immediate family accounted for about 1.5 percent of them.

It was a tiny pioneer community founded amid a small but growing city. As a result, the emphasis was on getting along and fitting in. Over time, alcohol was consumed by many, if not most; the *salaat*, the prayers said five times daily, were often ignored. In several homes, Christmas trees were trimmed, Easter egg hunts were organized, and Halloween was celebrated. Friendships between Arabs and Jews were common. The odd intercultural business relationship resulted, and members of Edmonton's comparably small Jewish community helped fund the Al Rashid Mosque.

For these Edmonton Arabs, religion was a less significant bond than ethnicity. Intermarriage between Christians and Muslims (both Arab and not) was fairly common, and among the eight children in my father's family only half married within the faith. My mother's side was even less bound by tradition. Her father, a Lebanese Muslim, had married a Canadian-born woman of Scottish ancestry, and of the five children in her family only one, my mother, married a Muslim.

Because the Arab community was small, practices that emphasized similarities between Christians and Muslims were played up, and differences played down. The mosque functioned more as a community centre, a place where Arab youths would gather to dance the traditional *dubke* or, on occasion, the jitterbug. Things as seemingly unimportant as music and cuisine — fatiya and kibbeh, tabbouleh and hummus — became bridges between two groups that were increasingly identifying as one.

Still, some traditions endured. While halal butchers were practically unheard of, the prohibition against eating pork was widely observed by Muslims, though certainly not in every home. Once, when my grandmother was visiting, she encountered something in our kitchen that would make any contemporary cleric's blood curdle.

"Bobby!" she shouted to my father. "There's a big ham in your refrigerator!"

My dad, ever the dutiful son, sauntered over. He opened the fridge door and looked inside, then furrowed his brow. "That's not a big ham, Mother," he said, closing the door.

"Bobby, don't lie, *ya haram*. I saw it with my own eyes."My father reopened the door. "Oh, that," he said. "That's a *little* ham."

All that said, the community was far from idyllic — or, for that matter, monolithic; certain families hewed more closely to the ways of the old country than others. It was engaged in a pattern typical for a newly arrived group: a struggle to negotiate old traditions within the slipstream of a new and very different culture. Most first- and second-generation Arabs adopted a flexible approach to their Islamic faith; in turn, the faith proved flexible enough to allow for its North Americanization.

Over time, the community spawned its share of businessmen, academics, and sundry other pillars. My father's brother, Edward Saddy, was the first Muslim judge in Canada. Another uncle (by marriage, to my father's sister), Larry Shaben, was Alberta's minister of economic development and trade — the first Muslim in Canada to hold a provincial cabinet position. One of my father's sisters married Muhammad Ali Bogra, from 1953 to 1955 the prime minister of (then united) East and West Pakistan.

While boundaries were stretched by the second generation, the third-generation kids — us — pushed them even further. We experimented with drugs, had friends and lovers of every faith and persuasion, and became increasingly secular. We mainstreamed. It was a quintessentially

Canadian experience, repeated countless times in dozens of other ethnic communities across the nation. The only thing truly notable about it was how ordinary it was.

But things have changed. Since that early tally of Canadians of Islamic faith, the number of Muslims here has grown more than a thousandfold. Many mosques have attracted an increasingly conservative leadership and a similarly conservative following, drawn largely from the 90 percent of the current community born outside Canada.

For those inclined to cherry-pick the negatives, there has been a bounty: The Toronto 18. Vancouver cleric Younus Kathrada and his characterization of Jews as "brothers of monkeys and the swine." Momin Khawaja. A taxi driver who refused to pick up a blind man with his guide dog, since to do so would, according to some aberrant reading of the faith, be prohibited. And so on.

What has happened? Some observers feel that with this new community, integration is not necessarily in the cards. Or is it? Can Islam be Canadianized? Or, more accurately, can it be Canadianized again?

It's Islamic Awareness Week at the University of Alberta, and the students' union building is the centre of the action, such as it is. On a cool Wednesday afternoon, just a few visitors mill about the displays. On one table lies a selection of children's books: *Tell Me About Hajj*, *Hurray It's Ramadan*, *I Am a Little Moslem*, and other tales designed to imbue fealty. At another, Iman, a stunning *hijabi* whose high cheekbones and fine features are common to East Africa, is selling Islamic Awareness Week T-shirts for $15. Nearby, they're offering henna tattoos. There's also a draw for an iPod.

Under the banner of the Muslim Students Association, Fatima Ahmed, a Canadian-born volunteer, is handing out a questionnaire. "Want to try it?" Sure. As I fill it out — questions range from "Who do Muslims worship?" to "Where was the first mosque in North America built?" — I ask Ahmed about her hijab. "It's actually a scarf," she says. She made the decision to wear it in 2001.

"You have excellent timing," I say.

Ahmed smiles. "I got some looks," she says, "but in the post-secondary community it's not an issue."

Two decades ago, when I was a student here, overt displays of religious symbolism were limited to the odd Sikh turban or (very) rare Jewish yarmulke, the crucifix having already been

watered down to the status of prop in a Madonna video. Expressions of solidarity with, as Edward Said might have put it, the "Oriental other," were limited to the odd Palestinian kaffiyeh scarf. Nobody I was acquainted with — not any of my aunts, or my female cousins — wore head coverings. The hijab was as uncommon as the bow tie.

Today it's part of a changed landscape. It has been three years since I've been back to Edmonton, the city I called home for the first thirty years of my life. So much of what I once knew is missing now; more than any other place that comes to mind, Edmonton cannibalizes its past. The original city hall, a lovely modernist building erected in 1956 and reflective of the era in which the city began to come of age, was torn down, replaced in 1992 by a couple of cool-looking glass pyramids that evoke, well, triangles. The city's premier live music venue, the Sidetrack Café, was demolished to make way for yet another banal condo, and Flashback, its preeminent gay bar, is long gone. Even the name of Edmonton's best-used park wasn't safe from repositioning: in 1976, Mayfair Park was re-christened William Hawrelak Park, in honour of a mayor whose resumé read like a rap sheet. As a teenager, I was arrested there for marijuana possession, which seemed both ironic and fitting.

What remains triggers a sense of overwhelming loss. Leaving the campus behind, I drive past the junior high where I first kissed a girl, the field where I played baseball, the area around Twin Bridges where as teenagers we'd get shitfaced on flats of Hi-Test and fall asleep next to a fire on the banks of Whitemud Creek — all signposts from a youth that has long since passed. I turn down our old street. Our family home is not ours anymore. Since my father's death, even my family is greatly changed.

And yet so much of who I am springs from this city. Who we are — what we become — is largely a product of time, place, and circumstance. Context shapes us. And the context that informs this newest generation of Muslims is much different.

On a brisk Thursday morning, I meet Nida Farooqui, one of the organizers of the Mosquers, an annual film festival that for the past two years has showcased videos made by local Muslim youth. I pick her hijab out of the crowd at the Second Cup near Holt Renfrew downtown, and over coffee she gives me a quick overview. In 2007, the Mosquers' inaugural year, the entries tended to be serious and a little political. This year, she says, was different. The winning comedy entry, called *Thinly Sliced Strips* — yes, it's about an obsession with bacon — played to a standing-room-only crowd. The film is by no means polished, but there are some funny bits. Its message, though, is mixed. After searching for and finally discovering halal bacon, one of the main characters scarfs it back — and almost chokes to death. A mild reproach is the intent. Eve, a serpent, and an apple come to mind.

Although the majority of those who attended the Mosquers were Muslim, the intended audience was much broader. “The whole point of it is to decrease negative stereotypes of Muslims,” says Farooqui. She has found Edmonton’s non-Muslims by and large receptive, which, she says, has helped the city’s Muslim community to grow. “We’ve gained a lot of confidence,” she reflects. “We know who we are, we’re proud of who we are, and we know what we stand for. We don’t need to get on the defensive.” I’d like to believe that. But isn’t going on the defensive what the Mosquers is all about?

In one sense, Farooqui is following in my footsteps. We were both born in Edmonton, roughly twenty years apart. We grew up in the city’s southern suburban reaches and attended the same high school, Harry Ainlay Composite, a concrete bunker home to about 2,000 kids of all backgrounds. But that’s where the similarities end. Farooqui has, at twenty-six, never dated. She has never drunk alcohol; none of her Muslim friends drink. She lives at home, and will until she marries. Most tellingly, her choices are reinforced by her peers. Farooqui’s close friends are largely Muslim; of those, all are Canadian born. Her life revolves largely around her religion. Because I was raised outside the apron of the mosque, my high school experiences were almost entirely the opposite, right down to my peer group, which consisted exclusively of non-Muslim friends. But then, I had little choice.

In 1971, there were 33,000 Muslims in Canada. Three decades later, there were 580,000, and most estimates put today’s population at around 850,000. These increases, due almost entirely to immigration, mean the community is now large enough to form its own enclaves. It can publish its own newspapers, support its own retailers, live in its own neighbourhoods, operate its own summer camps, marry its daughters to acceptable sons, and construct its own schools, such as the newly opened Islamic Academy, a 135,000-square-foot K–9 institution situated on a sprawling plot in north Edmonton. Factor in the relative ease of intercontinental travel and the ability to reconnect via the web with whom and what you’ve left behind, and you have a recipe for maintaining religious traditions within a largely secular culture. You also have a potential formula for insularity.

Farooqui’s environment, though, is far from closed: in addition to having non-Muslim friends, she has nearly completed a contract with the provincial government to promote post-secondary education. Even though she wears the hijab, she says she has never really been subject to discrimination — a testament to a dominant culture that has truly come to believe in the Canadian multicultural model.

I’m glad to hear it, although it runs counter to my experiences growing up in this city in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time when Paki jokes were an actual comedy genre, and anyone who looked remotely brown, including me, was caught up in the same vile net. “We’re just like

everybody else," Farooqui tells me. She has repeated this three times in the past minute. For some reason, the nickname I was saddled with in junior high leaps to mind: "Rug Rider."

Farooqui is right, of course. Muslims are like everybody else. They pay their taxes and, according to pollster Michael Adams, love their country and (I'm guessing here) ice hockey. Red blood might even course through their veins. But they are also unalike in very significant ways.

Although the demonization of Arabs and Muslims began much earlier, September 11 was a crucible. In the United States, racist attacks, including murder, took place in the immediate aftermath, while the introduction of draconian legislation such as the Patriot Act also set the American Muslim community on edge. In Canada, the reaction was less far reaching but still severe. Bill C-36, with its sweeping powers of arrest and detention, was introduced, albeit with a sunset clause. The extraordinary rendition of Maher Arar, and RCMP complicity in it, made the simple act of flying through the US a small gamble. CSIS came calling on some, hoping for a chat.

The tenor of intercultural discussion also changed. Media outlets, notably the Asper-owned *National Post*, led the charge: "We should not pretend that an effective fight against terrorism can be waged in a truly colour-blind fashion," wrote columnist Jonathan Kay. "The fact is, those who plot the annihilation of our civilization are of one religion and, almost without exception, one race." Even Ian Brown, a writer not given to simple stereotyping, sang a similar refrain in the *Globe and Mail*, although he couched his poison in a paragraph chocked with equivocations: "I will never see another devout, turban-wearing Muslim without wondering — unfairly, I admit, against my better instincts, I realize, but doing so nevertheless — was he part of it? Or, at least, did he feel remorse? And I will never know the answer." From the rabid right to the squishy centre, a choir of reactionaries reciting Samuel Huntington, chapter and verse.

In this occasionally toxic environment, Canadian Muslims have had to negotiate their identity — or, more accurately, identities. Edmonton's roughly 35,000 Muslims comprise almost sixty nationalities, several languages (including Urdu, Arabic, Farsi, Malay, Turkish), and at least a handful of sects (Sunni, Shia and Ismaili, as well as much smaller groups like Ahmadis and Sufis). A community of communities, each vastly different from the other. Compared with the original Edmonton Muslims, who spoke the same language, were of the same sect, shared the same culture, and largely hailed from the same two villages, it is extraordinarily diverse. Because of this, trying to find out "who Muslims are" today is roughly akin to asking who Torontonians are.

Who, then, can claim to speak on behalf of such a diverse group? The short answer is no one and anyone. Because Islam lacks a formal hierarchy, anyone can claim to represent it. This wasn't always the case in Edmonton; because the pioneer community was small and tightly knit, leaders emerged naturally. "In the earlier years, the seniors were always spokespersons of the community," says my uncle Edward Saddy, a past president of the Canadian Islamic Centre. "You got there on merit — everybody knew who would be the right person for the right job."

Today competing essentialist visions tend to drown out more reasoned voices. Mohamed Elmasry, chair and president of the conservative Canadian Islamic Congress, has ripped into some moderates using the rustiest of canards: "Self-hating Muslims secretly (or not so secretly) despise their religion and curse the day their parents gave them Muslim names. Yet most lack the courage to change either name or faith," he writes. "Instead, they try to accommodate their ambivalence by being very selective, or even minimal, in their Islamic practices."

Elmasry's excesses are often matched by those who oppose him, most notably Tarek Fatah, former head of the liberal Muslim Canadian Congress. Since many schools of Islamic jurisprudence decree that apostates be put to death, Fatah reasons that conservatives who imply that he and others like him are anti-Muslim are essentially levelling a death sentence. The MCC's solution? Make any implication of apostasy illegal — an act that would cut short heated discussion of who is a Muslim, but also deliver a body blow to free speech.

Then there are those taking action on behalf of Muslims against skewed depictions of themselves and their faith — often misguidedly, and with spectacularly poor results. The Osgoode Hall law students who went after *Maclean's* for running an excerpt from Mark Steyn's new book, *America Alone*, generated a tsunami of negative publicity when they filed complaints against the magazine with both the Ontario and Canadian Human Rights Commissions. Calgary cleric Syed Soharwardy's grievance to the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission about the *Western Standard* and its former publisher, Ezra Levant, for reprinting the Danish "Mohammed" cartoons, essentially came down to the right not to be offended. (Soharwardy eventually dropped his complaint, and both HRCs opted not to proceed against *Maclean's*, for different reasons. But the case was forum-shopped by members of the Canadian Islamic Congress and is currently being heard in BC.) The unintended result: Ezra Levant and Mark Steyn, two minor-league provocateurs, were recast as free speech icons.

The community has fared better when it has been able to cast itself, as it has quite literally with the Mosquers and, more important, with *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. Created by Zarqa Nawaz, a Muslim writer and producer who worked for CBC and CTV, *Little Mosque* is

that rarest of things: a hit Canadian sitcom. Equally rare, it portrays Muslims who don't spontaneously combust. Set in the fictional town of Mercy, Saskatchewan, the series revolves around a small group of devout followers surrounded by the often baffled and sometimes reactionary citizens of the dominant "white" culture. Hilarity occasionally ensues.

The world Nawaz has created is a product of her experiences. Born in Liverpool in 1967, she moved with her family to Canada in 1972, eventually settling in Brampton, Ontario. Like many of her peers, she rediscovered her faith in her teenage years. At thirteen, she began wearing the hijab; later she grew even more serious. "I went through this 'little fundamentalist' stage when I was in high school," she says. "I've since come full circle. But when you're young and you discover faith, you tend toward the black and white."

In 1993, she married her husband, a Muslim and a doctor born in Montreal and raised in Saskatchewan. They ultimately landed in Regina. Over the years, she produced four children and an equal number of short films, as well as 2005's *Me and the Mosque*, a well-regarded documentary. Then came *Little Mosque*, for which, she admits, she softened a few edges. For example, Mercy hosts one lone fundamentalist, of whom she says with a laugh, "Baber — whooo! He'd be, like, 90 percent of a mosque." And then there is Amaar, the town's forthright and very modern imam: clean shaven and without any accent, he's as Canadian as puffed wheat. "Completely fictional," she says. "There's no such thing as an indigenous Canadian, born-and-raised imam."

Ah, but there is. Or was. Sort of. When my father was taught his prayers in Arabic every Sunday, it was often by Ameen "King" Ganam, a Saskatchewan-born farm kid who played fiddle with Tommy Hunter and had his own CBC radio show. And as for modern touches, the first imported imam to preside over Al Rashid, Hammudah Abd Al-Ati (born and trained in Egypt), was a clean-shaven sophisticate. He eventually left his flock for Princeton, where he completed a Ph.D.in sociology.

It's hard to fault Nawaz for being unaware of the history of her culture. In a way, it's not really hers at all. But her representations are often taken to be emblematic of Canadian Muslims generally, which can be a problem. For instance, although most of the show's female Muslim characters wear the hijab, in fact only 42 percent of Muslim women choose to visibly identify themselves as members of the faith.

To be fair, Nawaz is being criticized from both ends: her generally rosy portrait has also made her the object of suspicion among those who think Islam and comedy shouldn't mix. The problem is that, like most representations of the community, positive or not, her portrait is largely one-dimensional.

A more accurate reflection of Canadian Islam can be found in the admittedly unexciting form of a political action coalition from Edmonton. Formed in the wake of 9/11 and designed to coordinate the community's response to uncertain times, the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities has already made an impact locally: its efforts recently led to the endowment of a chair in Islamic Studies at the University of Alberta.

More remarkable is the fact that the ECMC exists at all. Historically, sectarian divisions presented an impossibly high hurdle for Muslims attempting to present a broad-based, unified front. Animosity between Sunni and Shia traditionalists can be intense, and many Muslims don't consider Ismailis to be part of the greater Islamic whole. But by agreeing to work together, the ECMC participants — from Sunni to Shia to Ismaili — tacitly made room not only for each other, but for alternate versions of Islam. All in all, a very Canadian compromise, perhaps one indicative of the future of Islam in this country.

That said, the ECMC unfortunately decided to carry on Syed Soharwardy's fight with the *Western Standard*. Alberta's human rights commission dismissed the case in August, but by then it had become a cause célèbre among free speech defenders of all stripes. I would have expected a more nuanced response from the coalition, especially since its chairperson happens to be a second-generation member of Edmonton's original Muslim community. Ezra Levant has suggested that the chair, Larry Shaben, is a fascist. Most news organizations refer to him as a respected community leader. I call him Uncle, and have enormous regard for him. But with the ECMC's actions, I must disagree.

Is there a new Canadianized Islam? No. Clearly there are several, each a natural outgrowth of time and circumstance. There are the Ismailis, the followers of the Aga Khan, a well-integrated and influential community of about 75,000 that has produced a disproportionate number of high-profile leaders, such as former Ballard Power Systems chair Firoz Rasul and Liberal senator Mobina Jaffer. There are the gay Muslims of groups such as Salaam, whose founder, El-Farouk Khaki, ran as the NDP candidate in the last Toronto Centre by-election and lost to Bob Rae. There are the secular Muslims, some of whom see evidence of "sharia creep" around every turn. There are the traditionalists, who harbour a culture-bound and often narrow view of who is a Muslim. There is an assertive new generation, Canadian born yet observant, both a part of and apart from the "dominant" culture.

And then there is us, the descendants of the first Islamic wave. For some, I am a cautionary tale, evidence of what can happen to Muslims in Canada when the bonds of faith are allowed to fray. But they can rest easier knowing I am largely a charlatan. Although my father considered

himself a Muslim, he wasn't particularly observant, and we, his children, were raised without religion. I am a Muslim in about the same way as Barack Obama is: by bloodline at most. It was only as "Arab" became conflated with "Muslim," and "Muslim" with "terror" that I found myself identifying with a people and a faith with which I thought I had little in common.

Whether many Muslims would identify with me is another question. But the community, like this city in which it thrives, has already changed dramatically. More change is sure to come. There may even be a time when this faith, this culture, will make room for those of us who no longer believe in any god.

Before I return to Vancouver, I pay my respects to my father. He lies in the Muslim section of Beechmount Cemetery, next to his mother. Snow surrounds his grave, and my feet sink in as I make my way over. The back of his headstone reads KHALID. This was his Arabic name, but it was only one part of him.

His mother once told me that when my father was young, at night he would sometimes demand that she lie beside him on the bed. When she thought he was asleep, she would try to creep away, but my he would grab her arm and hold her close. This would continue until he finally went to sleep. Now they lie side by side for eternity, their headstones monuments to endurance and change.

Backing away from the graves, I retrace my steps so as not to fill my shoes with snow. On this Friday, the forecast calls for more flurries. As I drive to the airport, snow begins to fall, a bitter wind whipping the flakes. Soon the city will again be covered in white. By tomorrow, the tracks I made will be gone.

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