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Two days into my journey, having missed the revival, after more than a dozen hours spent putting distance between the Nissan and the familiar terrain of the East Coast, I found myself on a highway somewhere in south-central Ohio. The sun was high, my windows were down, the left lane was clear: the entire setting could have been in the *Pilgrimage for Dummies* manual. Everything ought to have been fine. It wasn't. It is amazing that two days could inspire so much self-doubt. But at the time, I couldn't imagine why *anybody* would want to talk to me.

The highway felt like a vacuum. I couldn't get off, I didn't want to slow down, and as one gas tank and then another emptied, I grew impatient with my reticence. Whatever my hypothesis about contact and conversation and the remaking of American community had been (and how depressing it seemed that after two slow-motion days I was speaking of my pilgrimage in the past tense), I feared I was merely windmill chasing. What if this journey had been only a whim after all, and my first days on the road were merely a preamble of missteps to come? In daydreaming and sugarcoating, had I hatched a pilgrimage from some stale, adolescent, Jack Kerouac fantasy? Or worse, had I simply purchased my identity as a pilgrim?

In the nervous days before I left, after those evenings of conversation with Liz, I sought a way to authenticate myself as a pilgrim. In the process, I followed in the footsteps of many proud Americans who seek to be what they are not yet: I pulled out my wallet. I visited the audio-video store on Newbury Street near the Boston Common and invested in a Sony mini-disk player-recorder and microphone that would capture radio-quality sound. Of course! I will create radio programs of these interviews. I am Charles Kuralt, only hipper. Then I walked over to the Copy Cop on Boylston Street near Fairfield and went straight to the desk where business cards are designed. When I returned the following day, the store's clerk, a woman about my age, pulled from beneath the counter a rectangular box of five hundred cards that cost fifty bucks. Impatiently, I reached for the box. I wanted to insert a few in my wallet, then unsheathe one in front of the store's mirror, flashing it like a police badge, this verification of my calling. But before handing over the box, the clerk snuck a peak at the side of the box, where a sample card had been stapled.

In raised black ink, at the center of the white card, in a typeface I saw as stylized *and* basic, a sort of everytype, I had designed the card to read as follows:

GOD IS:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF FAITH IN AMERICA

Beneath that claim was another, in raised, gray ink: Tom Levinson, *Project Director*. I had chosen to call myself project director, not freelance pilgrim, not stalling member of the workforce, not Quixote 2000. Underneath my name and the italics was the address of the nonprofit organization of a friend who had agreed to sponsor my project, enabling me to apply to foundations for grant money. During July I had written a proposal and sent it to a couple of small foundations, but I wasn't expecting a windfall. My dad offered me a small chunk of money for the trip. To me it was a loan; to him it functioned like an investment. I was a growth stock, and he believed there was at least a chance, hangnail-thin but visible nonetheless, that my pilgrimage would spawn some kind of cottage industry, with me as full-time writer-religious road tripper, or documentary journalist and token Jew for the 700 Club. Such a rationale made my economic dependence palatable.

"Cool," the clerk said. As soon as the word left her mouth, I blushed. The Copy Cop lady believed in me. Her small, reflex reaction had suddenly vindicated the plan and my project. "God bless you, Copy Cop!" I wanted to shout.

I shook my head at the memory. The cards were in my wallet as I drove through southwestern Ohio, thinking about how to explain my premature return to family, friends, and self without being branded an armchair visionary and a roadside wallflower. I half-expected that by virtue of naming a road trip a pilgrimage, the world would welcome me without my needing to introduce myself. And so I drove as though expecting some kind of signal—not exactly the burning bush variety, not a command, but a suggestion, an exit off the interstate that looked like an invitation.

I found myself twenty miles north of Dayton, Ohio, when I resolved to quit whining, stop waiting, and just choose an exit. As the signs for Dayton drew nearer, then arrived, I signaled, changed lanes, then left the highway. The off-ramp split in two and I chose the route the car in front of me had not. That road spat me out at a red light. Utterly uninformed about where to go, who to see, and what to hear, I was guided by the exit, the off-ramp, and the road to an answer.

The street signs informed me I was at the corner of Fifth and Keowee. Opposite me, on the other side of the red light, lime green Arabic script ran from right to left across the pediment of a white-stuccoed corner store. That's cool, I thought. Maybe I'm supposed to pull over. No, dummy, I

heard, not maybe. Of *course* you're supposed to go in. I parked the car in front of a ramshackle two-story house with its front door wide open, packed the recording equipment and camera in a small, canvas bag, and walked to the storefront. The door had vertical bars and opaque glass, and before opening it I caught in the reflection a cloudy glimpse of my clueless face.

The store stretched long and narrow like a train car. A whiff of spices, heavy like a Middle Eastern potpourri, evoked the atmosphere of an East Jerusalem market. A mechanical grinding sound—occasionally punctured by the screech of a saw—came from a room at the back of the store. The noise halted when an aproned man stepped from the room to the register at the counter. I could see he carried a package wrapped in white paper, held together by masking tape. When he looked up to speak to his customer, I ducked into a side aisle, where I picked up bottles of imported artichoke hearts, canned cherries, and green olives, turning them upside down, blowing off dust—procrastinating, basically. I seemed fourteen again, at the dance in the school cafeteria, nestled between coy and cowardly. The lone customer soon left. With a deep breath I tried to look nonchalant as I walked the thirty feet up the carpeted aisle to the counter.

I waved to the man behind the register—it was less a wave than a “how,” the way the native chief is portrayed greeting the Pilgrim spokesman in Thanksgiving reenactments—before saying anything. When I did open my mouth, I came up with, “How’s it going?”

“Hi,” the young man behind the counter said. He had short, dense black hair, thick black eyebrows, a slightly beaked nose, and a goatee that hadn’t quite filled in yet. Light from the windows in the back room lent a soft glow to the counter lined with cigarettes, phone cards, and Chiclets.

Okay, he said hi. Now you, Tommy. “I’m a, I’m, uh,”—there was a good start, promising, professional. “Here’s the thing. I’ve been working on a project where I’ve been recording talks with Muslims all over the country.” This, of course, was a fiction, or as I preferred to see it, a prediction. “And I just got into Dayton and I pulled off the highway and there I was, with Arabic right in front of me. And so I’m wondering if you maybe might have any time to talk.” I paused to collect my breath.

“Well, it’s Thursday, you know, so it’s going to be very busy,” he said. In Islam Friday is the set day for rest and prayer, so Muslims do much of their shopping and preparation on Thursdays. I hadn’t thought of this. Nodding, I was about to thank him for his courtesy and leave him my card before backpedaling and making a swift pivot out the door. “But if you do not mind the crowd, then yes,” he said, sounding flattered, “I would love to.”

I introduced myself to Hayder Almosawi. Born in Iraq, Hayder moved to southern Ohio as a teenager with his brothers in 1992, after the first Gulf War.

I had just finished setting up the equipment on the front counter when a swell of customers entered the store. Indian men wearing pleated slacks and golf shirts; light-skinned women in loose-fitting ensembles of silk pants, tops, and head coverings of the same color; and African American men wearing dashiki prints, knit headpieces, and sandals crammed the space near the counter. I felt bashful and hoped that Hayder would proceed with his commerce without thinking of me. But, ambassadorial in the way he greeted customers, Hayder kept introducing people to me in his halting, Middle Eastern accent. "Brother," he said, looking toward a man at the left of the counter, "please, won't you talk to this friend." "Sister," he said, raising his hand to ask the question, "if you have just one moment, here is Tom." He reminded me a little of my grandma Ruth, who at a restaurant has been known to introduce her grandchildren to the *maitre d'*, waiters, and occasionally the coat-check staff. As I met more of Hayder's customers, I realized that I had stumbled upon a global sampling of Muslims—natives of Bangladesh, Syria, Uzbekistan, and Dayton—who converged at the market at 5th and Keowee every Thursday afternoon.

Roxanne Masni overheard me introducing my road trip in a nutshell to a Pakistani physician. Roxanne wore a cream-colored, body-length *hijab*. Her wardrobe matched her skin tone. Once the physician left, I pointed down to the microphone and asked if she might have a moment. She nodded. "I'm gonna just give you a few minutes, cause I've got a baby in the car."

Roxanne came from an Indian background, but while many relatives were Hindu and Sikh, her immediate family, living in New Jersey, was Christian. She had worked as a nurse at a local hospital, where many other staff members were Muslims. Contact with them, and her own self-initiated comparative study of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, had led her to convert to Islam years earlier. Now she taught at the Dayton Islamic School. I would have butted in to ask about this comparative process—what about Christianity had raised questions and what about Islam had answered them—but Roxanne seemed in such a hurry that I worried she might simply leave if I interrupted her. After a few minutes speaking, she paused.

"Is it difficult to be a Muslim in America?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "Because if you go back and read, everything that's in the Bible is in Islam. All the prophets stress exactly the same thing. The covering of the hair, modesty, pork is forbidden—it's all in there. Some

people look at Muslims as strange people, all covered up. But if they go back and read their Bible, they'll see the very same thing. In the New Testament, Corinthians talks about women covering the hair, and the modesty, and the dress. Everything's the same. It's just that in Christianity it's gone away over the generations.

"No man makes me cover my hair," she continued. "I cover *my* hair on *my* own. This"—she cradled the fabric covering her head with her hand—"comes from Allah. This is why my hair is covered. No man told me to dress the way I'm dressing."

Now we were rolling. Roxanne made her points forcefully, with none of the quiet deference I expected from a woman in traditional Muslim dress. She spoke with a quick, no-nonsense cadence, as though dictating a letter to a skilled shorthand secretary.

"Excuse me," Hayder said, "if I could interrupt you for a second. If you don't mind."

"No, that's okay," Roxanne said. "I'm gonna go." No, I thought to myself, you *can't* go. Somebody bar the door! But once Hayder started to speak, she remained at the counter to hear what the young shopkeeper had to say.

"There was an Indonesian lady," he said, "she was an exotic dancer. Then she converted to Islam." (I admit, for a moment the thought crossed my mind: Will *she* be in today?) "She chose to get covered. People asked her, 'How come you go from exotic dancer to covered Muslim lady?' She said, 'You know, being a Muslim is wonderful. Being naked and an exotic dancer, it's old-fashioned. A long time ago, before the prophets, ladies and men were all naked. But being covered, where no one can see your body, this is a new fashion.'"

"So the covering is an innovation?" I asked, redirecting the question to Roxanne. "Do you see it that way?"

She nodded. "Modesty's a very, very big part of Islam. Men have a code of dress, too, and a code of conduct. And both have codes of punishment. Men and women are each responsible for our own actions. I'm not going to care about what my husband looks at. He's responsible to God for how he behaves, and I'm responsible to God for how I behave," she said in the kind of finger-wagging tone often reserved for the sets of daytime talk shows. "There's a lot of negative, not truthful things about the way the roles of men and women are perceived in Islam. In the Koran, the roles are equal but different."

As Roxanne spoke I felt a surge of gratitude to both the independent, stereotype-razing perspective she offered of Islam and the highway for leading me to her and Hayder. Islam, before and after the events of September

11, has frequently been represented by images of women cloaked from head to toe. The only visible parts of their bodies are their eyes, peering from narrow slits in their veils. Under yards of seemingly shapeless fabric, the women appear to lack not solely physical shapes but individual identities. They glide like specters, shrouded, as if they live in a state of perpetual mourning; the implication, of course, is that they mourn for themselves. These pictures function mainly as the synonyms for Islamic extremism and women's subservience.

Roxanne Masni transformed my notion of what it is to be a Muslim woman. The veil I assumed to be a commonly understood symbol of subjugation became an emblem of her independence. To be covered was not demeaning but elevating, not a humiliation but an honor. "This is a shield for me," she said, again touching her head covering. She moved her hand back and forth to her head with the compulsive sincerity of teenaged Jewish boys I had observed in an Orthodox Jewish *yeshiva* (school), fidgeting incessantly with their yarmulkes. "This is honor.

"You have to understand," Roxanne continued, "this is religion. To understand Islam, you have to know the religion, and not mistake it for the culture. As converts, we practice the religion and leave the culture out. We try the pure form. My husband is Egyptian. If I know Koran and Hadith, the teachings of the Prophet, and my husband is behaving a certain way and he says, 'That's part of Islam,' I can say, 'No, it's not.' *That's* only a part of culture."

While I received Roxanne's empowered attitude with enthusiasm, I felt stumped by a few questions that her perspective raised. First, I didn't know if this was Roxanne's opinion or widely acknowledged fact. The Koran called for modesty, but did it specify with any particularity the type of wardrobe that constituted modesty? Second, I wondered whether other converts, both in Islam and other religious traditions, lay claim to a proprietary perspective unavailable to people born into the faith. And what did the "pure form" of a religion, one trimmed of cultural fat and anachronistic, traditional bone, look like? Was such a thing even possible? I wasn't sure.

The Hadith Roxanne mentioned is a collection of hundreds of traditions, also known as *Sunna*, recounting the behavior and words of the Prophet Muhammad, his colleagues, and the earliest Muslim adherents. Muhammad was a seventh-century Arabian merchant, already a middle-aged man when he received the first in what became a twenty-three-year series of revelations. What he heard in these revelations would come to be the complete text of the Koran. While the Koran is Islam's sacred scripture and its immutable text, Hadith constitutes a more elastic recounting of the

Prophet's customs, actions, and lessons. An individual Sunna describes not only what the Prophet preached and practiced, but how. The Hadith, compiled over the two centuries after the Prophet's death, reverentially describes the ho-hum every day of the Prophet—how he walked and talked, how he ate a meal, and how he clipped his nails. The Prophet's life serves as a blueprint for all Muslims, and through Hadith the ideal life became at once historical reality and instruction manual. Interestingly, Hadith is derived from a root meaning "being new." When I asked Roxanne if she saw her covering as "an innovation," she nodded "yes," adding that the etiquette of modesty in dress extended to men as well as women. Both Hadith and the traditions it spawned cloak inheritance as invention, tradition as novelty. Certainly, to dress with a mindful, explicit conservatism is a statement of defiance in America; what might seem hopelessly old-fashioned actually constitutes a vanguard of discretion. I wondered if orthodox believers in other traditions feel the same way.

Roxanne said she had to go. I thanked her. She thanked me. Hayder thanked Roxanne. Roxanne thanked Hayder. We were a chorus of courtesy. As Hayder and I watched the door close behind Roxanne, I glanced over at the mini-disk recorder to confirm it was running. *Yes!* At the very least, even if I was to pack in the pilgrimage then and there, even if no one else spoke with me, I still would have witnessed fifteen iconoclastic, re-defining minutes of religion in America. I nodded at Roxanne's points, although what I ended up wanting to say as a reply amounted to a most American expression of emancipation: "You go, girl!"

Still, in the hours spent driving after I left the Almosawis' market, I wondered if Roxanne's form of empowered orthodoxy had been facilitated by her having been born outside Islam's traditional borders. She understood her choices as expressions of a pure form of Islam. But as I thought about them and the rationale behind them, they seemed to be products of her Americanness. After all, had she been born in Saudi Arabia or Iran, where hijab is not an option but an obligation for a woman, Roxanne probably would have been compelled to adopt the customs and the logic behind them offered by the native culture. As an American, she had the advantage of approaching Islam as a student, curious and critical, not as an internal reformer perceived as a troublemaker. Her path seemed a typically American, consumer-bred approach to religion: survey the options, compare and contrast, select what works best for you, then personalize it so that your theology fits your ideology. Like many other satisfied consumers, Roxanne had made a conscious decision to be identified outwardly with a recognizable "brand." Clothing was a personal choice and, simultaneously, a religious declaration.

"She pretty much said whatever I have to say," Hayder said. "That was excellent."

Roxanne's departure sapped some of the energy from our conversation. Not certain how initially to proceed with Hayder in his now-quiet store, I thought I would try to impress him with my Arabic. "*Kiif baalak?*" I said, Arabic for "How are you?" Arabic is a gender-based language, like Spanish and French and Hebrew, and my hope in that moment was that I had remembered to use the masculine form. "I don't know too much more, I'm afraid." He laughed. From the back room, the groaning of a saw made us pause. The shop doubled as a *halal* butchery, where meats are prepared in accordance with Islamic dietary regulations, much the same as Judaism's kosher prescriptions.

Two customers asked for Hayder's help and he excused himself for a moment. I watched his interactions: every time someone asked him "*Kiif baalak?*" or offered some similar greeting in Arabic, he responded with something like a curtsy of the shoulder. When women approached the register, his head momentarily lowered, a subtle sort of bow. I asked him about Islamic protocols and the traditional etiquette of conversation.

"More than twenty *suras* in the Koran speak of it," he said. "How you should speak to people, the level of your voice. When I speak to you, I can't speak with a loud voice when I'm close to you. When you speak with a very loud voice, you do not show respect. You have to speak nicely and properly. Also, the Koran tells you how to walk: you don't keep lifting your head to look at people. This is not a good way. Try to keep your eyes down, not lifting them from the floor. That will win respect from people looking at you. Maybe here people wouldn't understand, but in Muslim countries they do. If I see a lady, looking at her is not nice."

I thought about how I try to make as much eye contact as possible, having inherited, I suppose, the American esteem for eye-to-eye cordiality. I had budgeted in precisely these moments of recognition with strangers as a fertile ground for finding people to interview. Hayder said the Koran preaches a radically different kind of protocol, in which respect is shown through restraint, not directness. The details of the daily world conspire to widen the gulf of misunderstanding between Islamic cultures and America, I thought. Muslim mores seem dogmatic to the U.S. observer, just as American informality appears licentious and explicitly un-Prophetic to the Islamic world. Roxanne's decision to cover herself came from Hadith, and she found strength and pride in what I assumed was a symbol of second-class citizenship. I wrote a note to myself: interpretation should always be available for reinterpretation.

Hayder and I chatted for another hour or so. He seemed content about life in Dayton. He and his brothers had attended Ohio public schools, worked at fast food restaurants like McDonald's and Cracker Barrel, and saved enough money to buy this market. They enjoyed a flourishing business, a close-knit local community of Muslims, and American citizenship. His Islam was very clearly connected to, but distinct from, Roxanne's. Behind the counter, he wore a polo shirt, pants, and brown shoes. Unlike Roxanne, Hayder presented no visible shorthand for his Muslim identity. He was an American shopkeeper, a merchant, and his store operated like a community center. When a young woman with teased blond hair and cut-off jean shorts came in, chomping on chewing gum, looking for cigarettes and a phone card, Hayder greeted her enthusiastically. Though the Koran might legislate them, there were no dress codes to enter Hayder's store. For the American convert, being religious in America means outing oneself and one's faith; for the Iraqi immigrant, being religious in America becomes, in part, a process of blending in.

Before I departed, Hayder filled my backpack with mangoes and homemade baklava. I protested in vain, thinking his offerings way too generous, but my twenty-something self-sufficiency was trumped by his old-school hospitality. I handed him my card. He looked at it and smiled. I told him to feel free to call me, that I'd be on the road a few months more. I walked outside and inhaled the early evening air. I started my car and it hummed. I left the Almosawi brothers' halal market at the corner of Fifth and Keowee, a pilgrim back in business.