



THE REAL MUSLIMS OF IRVING, TEXAS

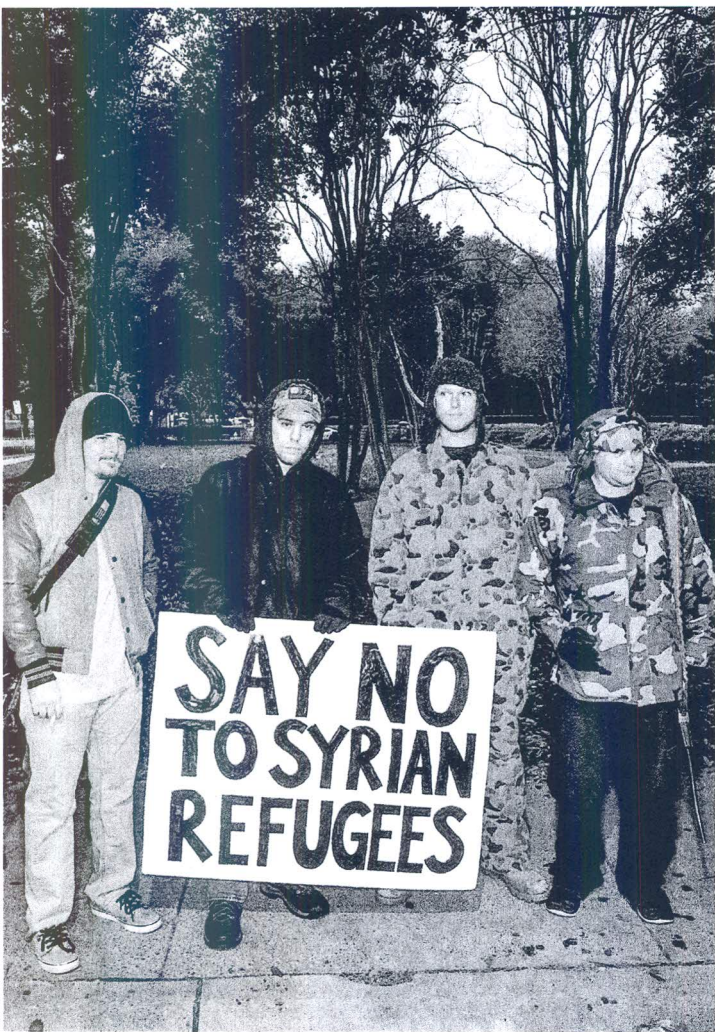
**WITH ARMED PROTESTERS OUTSIDE THEIR MOSQUE AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION
AND THE RIGHT TO CARRY CRASHING TOGETHER ON THEIR DOORSTEP, LONE STAR
MUSLIMS JUST WANT TO SAY HOWDY. BEFORE SOMEBODY GETS HURT.**



Outside the library in Irving, I notice that the clouds up above are getting a bit darker. A storm is gathering. The Christmas tornadoes will soon thrash this area. Off in the distance, there's an enormous brand-new house being built on a vacant lot. A Muslim couple stand in front of it with a man and a lady in a hijab going over blueprints. I drive over to them and park behind their minivan. Their kids wait patiently inside the van. I ask the guy how out of all the lots of land in the United States to build a house on, why here? He tells me because his business is here. I ask him about the guys who like to hang out with assault rifles at the mosque down the street and post the names and addresses of area Muslims online as suspected terrorists. The man with the blueprints becomes frustrated. He places his hands on his hips and tells me that this is all new, all happening in the last month or so, and how it wasn't always like that here. "Before, nothing," he says, "Now there's fear. Yes." ¶ He purchased his house before all this happened. Now he tells me he'd think twice about moving here, but now it's too late.



BY COLBY BUZZELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENT HUMPHREYS



two years old or a hundred.” People have smeared the front doors of mosques with pork and feces and left torn pages from the Koran and severed pigs’ heads, attended public meetings about possible mosque expansions to yell, “Every one of you are terrorists!” and “Nobody, nobody, nobody wants your evil cult!” The list goes on and on, and it’s never going to end.

Irving is where Ahmed the clock kid was arrested last year. And just up the road in Garland is where they held the “Draw Muhammad” contest.

Just before Christmas, I told my father that I would be spending the holidays with Muslims in Texas, as well as with the people who hate them.

He seemed lost.

“Muslims?” he asked. “In Texas?” He gave a painful groan of pity and said, “That’d be the very last place I’d ever want to live if I was a Muslim.”

At one point when he was in the Army, Dad was stationed in Texas. It was the 1960s and what he remembers most was how Texans didn’t like anything that wasn’t “Texas.” I told him that I was pretty certain that wasn’t the case anymore. “They especially don’t like Californians,” he said. He told me to be careful.

The Islamic Center of Irving is one of the largest mosques in the country. It was late November when a handful of Texas’s finest came together to hold a “peaceful” protest in this serene location to put the congregants on notice and make them feel unwelcome.

Just a week before, in Dallas, a First Baptist pastor named Robert Jeffress held a Sunday service in which he explained that Islam was “inspired by Satan himself,” and Donald Trump announced his plan to bar any Muslims from entering the country.

And the Texans took up arms. They called themselves the Bureau on American Islamic Relations, and at first about a dozen of them showed up to the protest. Of course, there was a person on flag detail, holding a pole with a red-white-and-blue American flag attached to it. There was also a mom holding up her handmade, multicolored STOP THE ISLAMIZATION OF AMERICA sign. She was proud of her twenty-year-old son, who showed up dressed in his G.I. Joe costume and told the media how he wanted to one day be in the military but for whatever reasons hadn’t gotten around to it. This kid had a buddy with him about the same age who also held up a sign that read, SOLUTION TO ISLAMIC TERRORISM with an arrow, kind of like the ones you see on I’M WITH STUPID shirts, to indicate that this protest was the solution to the problem. Both had permanent smiles on their faces as if they were having an absolute blast that day and the rest of the individuals in this crowd were all middle-aged or older. It was a bit cold out and they were all dressed accordingly. You got some rugged redneck-looking dudes hanging out, multilayering with heavy-duty work gear, jeans, and scuffed-up boots. One of these protesters fashionably accessorized himself with a confederate-flag hat.

When I first came across this story, I thought, what the fuck is their deal? What in the hell are they so afraid of? It’s just a mosque. I think of *Apocalypse Now*—“You either surf or fight!” I mean, I’m not afraid of Muslims. I’m not afraid of no mosque. “If I say it’s safe to surf this beach, Captain, it’s safe to surf this beach!”



HE WEATHER’S A BIT OVERCAST WHEN I drive up to the ninety-thousand-square-foot Islamic Center of Irving. I notice there’s only one vehicle in the parking lot, and it’s a police car. There’s no moisture on the cement under the car, so it’s probably a prop they always have out as a deterrent. I park next to it and make my way over to the entrance, which has several steel barricades set up in front of it, which reminds me of the mosques in Iraq that had cement

NEVER SHOT A CHURCH BEFORE. NOW, A mosque—I have shot a mosque.

I think it’s cute, these concerned citizens showing up with their guns at this mosque in Texas, looking for trouble, looking to “protest.” As an infantryman in a war I was eager to fight but never really understood, I put many holes in many buildings in Iraq with various caliber bullets—.50 cal, 7.62, 5.56—but especially in one mosque in particular. Mind you, I had nothing whatsoever against the Muslim people, because I knew nothing about the Muslim people. And that’s what I have in common with these fine Americans protesting Islam here in Irving, showing up with their rifles and their carbines to do what, it’s hard to say—they don’t know anything about the Muslim people, either. But here they are, legal long guns at the ready, exercising their right to threaten people. Here in Texas, you are more likely to die from a botched plastic surgery than at the hands of a terrorist, but the open-carry crowd is not lining up in front of the fancy surgeon’s office in Highland Park to drive him out of the state with their fake pig’s blood. And never mind what we have done to them. That’s something I have some firsthand knowledge of, but nobody wants to hear about that, because Americans hate Muslims, so let’s just get on with it.

What better way to defeat ISIS and say fuck you to all Muslims than to say fuck you to their mosques, right? Since the Paris and San Bernardino attacks, the U.S. has seen a series of anti-Muslim incidents directed at mosques. People use mosques for target practice, enter mosques wearing military fatigues for the purpose of wiping their dirty boots on prayer rugs while cursing out the worshippers, leave angry voice mails threatening to “firebomb you and shoot whoever is there in the head. I don’t care if they are fucking

walls around them to prevent car bombers from getting too close. At the Christian church across the street, they have no such barricades or any police cars sitting in the parking lot. There's also this huge water tower by the mosque that you can see from miles away that has IRVING and the town logo of a horse painted on it. We also had a water tower back at FOB Marez, in Iraq. It was like this one but had a 2nd Infantry Division and 101st Airborne patch painted on it. While jets from the nearby airport scream across the clouded sky above, I stop and stare at the mosque's enormous exterior for quite some time. (It's big, but it ain't nothing compared with Rev. Jeffress's five hundred thousand square feet of church over at First Baptist of Dallas.)

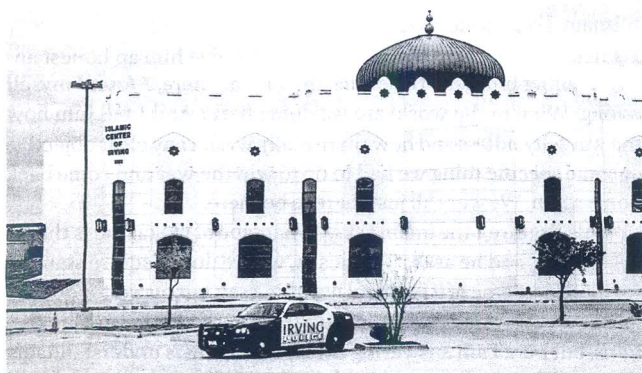
Like the Irving protesters, I also once stood in front of a mosque with all my friends and we all brought our firearms too, as well as a gratuitous amount of ammunition. This was back when I was in Mosul, a guest of the United States Army. The insurgents had attacked the downtown police station with a couple car bombs and then fled to the mosque, so we got called up to go kill them. I remember on our way to the mosque, the radios inside all our vehicles kept on saying over and over again, "Warning! Enemy in area!" As soon as we got there, we started receiving fire from the mosque, and every single fucking barrel belonging to a U.S. soldier was pointed at the holy building. We were just unloading on it. Other soldiers in my platoon sometimes refer to this day as a firefight, but if you ask me, it was more a demolition. There was this brief moment while I was reloading my weapon right after another TOW missile hit the mosque. I looked over and one of my fellow soldiers was sticking out of the back hatch of a Stryker vehicle hysterically throwing up the heavy-metal devil-horn hand signal like it was an Ozzy Osbourne concert and yelling, "Who-hoo! Fuck you, mosque! Fuck you!"

Armed now with nothing more than a hotel pen and a writing journal, I place my hand on the mosque door and enter. A guy inside tells me I'm early and the next call to prayer is in an hour or so.

While waiting at a nearby Waffle House, I order and wonder about the sign posted outside that reads, "Alcoholic beverages and firearms prohibited." No guns or booze sounds a bit un-American to me. Why aren't people with guns protesting Waffle House? The staff I see is half white, half black, and so is everyone seated around me. Everyone seems to be getting along. There's even a mixed couple with a biracial son seated at a booth. I'm sure Texas wasn't always like this. This took time.

I start chopping it up with the young guy seated by me at the counter. He's from New York, but his parents are both from India. He tells me that he really likes it here in Texas and so far he hasn't experienced any racist comments or other discrimination whatsoever.

When I bring up the armed protesters hanging out in front of



◆ Outside the 90,000-square-foot Islamic Center of Irving, a police car stands sentry to discourage protesters (opposite). The congregants at the mosque are undeterred by the protesters and welcome them to come see the mosque and meet real live Muslims, an offer few have accepted.

the mosque, he quickly tells me that there was also a huge counter-protest that had way more people show up. He also points out that from what he heard, it was the KKK who had originally planned to do the mosque protest but for whatever reason backed out, and most of the protesters weren't from the area. "They're mostly from smaller communities outside of Dallas," he says.

Insurgents, I think. Out-of-towners who come here to raise hell, radicalize the locals.

Heading back to the mosque, I wait in line in my car behind a series of other vehicles, many of which are cabs, trying to enter the parking lot. There's now a crowd assembling and a white hearse parked outside the entrance. Back inside, I take off my shoes and place them in the racks that line the walls. On either side of my cubby is a pair of girl's roller skates and a basketball with a pair of Air Jordans cradling it.

While I'm standing there in my tube socks, not quite sure what to do next, a man approaches and asks me if I need any help. I tell him it's my first time here and I'm not sure where to go. He kindly escorts me to the enormous prayer room. It's only about twenty steps away, and there's also a huge indoor basketball court where a bunch of kids are shooting hoops while others are kicking around a soccer ball. Chairs filled with elderly folks and parents surround the court. While watching, I meet a man named Logan who just moved to the area six months ago from Boston, and he tells me how he loves it here so far. A better job, lower cost of living, and family-friendly environment are what brought him here. He also points out how it's December and there's no snow.

We both smile to that. While walking around, I greet others who are showing up to pray, and they're all saying *Salaam alaikum* to me, so I say the return greeting back to them. While I'm shaking people's hands left and right and doing the whole *Salaam alaikum* thing, a part of me wonders if these people actually think I'm Muslim. I then chat it up with a guy from Egypt who doesn't miss home at all, loves Texas, and ended up here thanks to his wife. They met online and got married shortly afterward. She was born and raised in Texas, has blond hair, and is Christian. He's all smiles while telling me this story, to the point where you could tell that he just loves everything about his life. He tells me that she doesn't mind at all that he's Muslim and he doesn't mind at all that she's Christian. "We get along." He then excuses himself to go up to the front of the room to pray. I make my way toward the back, mostly just to keep distance and observe as more and more people start flooding the prayer room. I have no idea what in the hell is going on. There's a kid up front facing north, doing the call into a microphone.

So far, the experience of entering their mosque is nothing like the bar I visited the night before. Irving, and the area around the mosque, is like a lot of Arab countries—not a lot of bars. The one I checked out had a ridiculously large pickup truck and Harleys parked outside of it. Silence as all heads turned and stared as I entered. There was this one burly drunk at the end of the bar who constantly turned around to glare at me while sizing me up, as if he had a problem with me but didn't quite know what that problem was yet.

Nobody here at the mosque is like that. No one is giving me dirty looks of suspicion or asking me what I'm doing here. No one disapproves when I tell them I'm from California, nor do they respond by asking, "No, where are you really from?"

Over and over again, people at this mosque extend their hands out to me for a warm handshake and a kind *Salaam alaikum* greeting. I also notice how everyone is addressing me as a "brother."

Prior to this, my editor sent me a message asking if I contacted the mosque yet to let them know I was coming. Fuck that. I told him no, that I didn't want to do that, and how I wanted to just show up instead and see what happened. I did this on purpose. I wanted to

find out how these people would treat me, a fellow human being. So far, I felt like everyone here truly believed in “love thy neighbor.”

As more and more people are filing into the prayer room, I notice some are sitting down on the carpet, so I think “when in Rome” and I take a seat. Out of nowhere a little girl, maybe four or five years old, appears right in front of me. She’s wearing a head scarf and a hot-pink dress. She reminds me of the girls I came across while I was in Iraq. Then she does what most girls never dare to do: She gives me a huge smile and says hello. Taken aback by this, I hesitantly say hello and a second later I’m completely surrounded by what feels to me like a kindergarten class.

They’re all my son’s age. The boys are all dressed like my son, shirts with T. rexes and Pokémon, and a couple of them are behaving exactly how my son would in public: cartwheels, not paying attention, off in la-la land doing their own thing, picking for boogers, and pressing the ignore button on the guy who herded this crew into the prayer room. He’s now shoulder to shoulder with me and trying his best to get them all to listen to him. These kids are also like the adults here—none of them think anything of me being there or give me any looks or ask me why I’m there.

I then feel anger. Who thinks it’s okay to bring assault rifles to a place where families bring little kids? Calming myself down, I begin losing my mind in a different way. I notice the light from outside coming in through the windows and I get all wide-eyed. I’m thinking, Holy shit! Am I on a mission from God? Did Allah (peace be upon him) himself pitch this story for me to these guys? I mean, it has been years. Maybe I’ve been going to the wrong church all this time, praying for an assignment. Feeling inspired, I remind myself that I should quit drinking, and then start doing, or trying to do, what everyone else is doing. I get up, get down, touch the ground with my forehead, then get back up again, all while throwing in the occasional “*Allahu Akbar*.” It’s a strange thing to say, seeing as some people in Iraq liked to say that to me and my fellow soldiers while shooting AK or mortar rounds at us. The guy next to me is patiently instructing all the kids, as well as me, in how to properly pray. Not once does he ask me who I am or what I’m doing here, but instead whispers what’s going on. When the prayer session is over, a wooden casket is brought up to the front. He tells me it’s an elderly lady who passed away, and what they’re all about to do next is pray the Prayer of the Dead. Once this is over, I follow the flow of people out into the lobby. Moments later a group of guys walks past me carrying the casket out to the hearse.

I think back to the bodies that were dragged out of the mosque we fucked up in Iraq. U.S. soldiers weren’t allowed to enter mosques, so we just pulled security while the Iraqi National Guard soldiers went in to remove all the dead bodies.

While this was going on, an older Iraqi lady appeared from around a street corner. Dressed in traditional Arab attire, she appeared calm and was holding several plastic bags filled with groceries in one hand and a little boy’s hand in the other. She began speaking to me in Arabic and with her hands gestured that she lived on the street. She just wanted to go home and needed me to clear her to move.

Between the two of them and their front door lay a dead body that the ING had pulled from the mosque. Other than that, I saw no reason not to grant her request, so I nodded a yes and allowed her to go on by.

Curious, I followed them with my eyes as they casually made their way. As soon as they got to the lifeless body, the two of them looked down in unison, saw the dead body, then simultaneously looked right back up as if it was nothing. With no physical change in emotion whatsoever, they walked right on past it, all the way to their doorstep. When they got in and shut the door behind them, it hit me that even in a war, life goes on. I wondered if that was the case here as well. Most people just wanted to live in peace, go about their ev-

eryday lives, and be able to walk back home.

As everyone is exiting to go home, I run into Imam Zia, the main clergyman of the mosque. He’s a sturdy-looking guy and throws me a *Salaam alaikum*, and I introduce myself to him. He guides me to his office, and I get a bit nervous, because one of the reasons why I didn’t contact the mosque beforehand is that I noticed how they weren’t talking to the press. Many of the recent articles I’d come across indicated that they had no comment.

Seated in his very academic-looking office space that’s entirely filled with books, I notice a bit of a British accent. Imam Zia was born in Pakistan and his parents moved him to England when he was four. He describes his childhood as being pretty normal. He enjoyed playing soccer and cricket. In 1995, Zia moved to the United States because he had the opportunity to serve as an imam in this community. In England, he tells me, there are plenty of imams and it is difficult to find work as one, whereas here in the States there’s always a need for imams. In fact, there is such a shortage of Muslim clergy here that many mosques simply function without an imam. He’s been in Texas since 2005. He tells me the Muslim population is increasing in the area and that the growth is just amazing with the number of people moving here. Financially, it’s good for people because there’s no state income tax. The real estate is relatively cheap. The winters are not that harsh. There are a lot of factors that make Texas appealing to many people.

The differences between England and Texas make a pretty long list, but for Imam Zia the main difference is that in England, people are used to seeing Muslims. They don’t take a second look at them while passing them on the street or seeing them in a restaurant. Muslims can wear traditional Islamic clothing and it’s no big deal. “Nobody bats an eye,” he says. Here in Texas, however, many seem to experience culture shock, especially when Muslims go off to remote areas. “If you’re driving from here to Houston and you stop at a rest stop somewhere, it... can get weird,” he says.

Imam Zia asks me about myself. I tell him I grew up in California, biracial, been called every name you can think of—Chink, gook, half-breed, whatever. In high school, some Asians viewed me as being whitewashed because I didn’t hang out exclusively with Asians. My mother was an immigrant, came here from Korea, so I saw firsthand what that experience was like for her, how some people treated her and how that affected her. I joined the military, fought in Iraq, and now I write stories.

Imam Zia asks me if we should have invaded Iraq.

I hate politics more than anything, but I give him an honest answer, telling him how the entire time I was there, I found myself asking, What in the world are we doing here? And I tell him how the war felt endless and how there really wasn’t any clear objective or some specific thing we had to do to win the war and come back home again. We were all just there to be there.

“This Esquire,” the imam asks, “what type of magazine is this?”

I explain, and he asks, “Politically, where does Esquire stand?”

I chuckle. Some of it is liberal bullshit, I say, but my editor doesn’t tell me what to think. I laugh mostly because I had come to ask questions, but here I am answering them. The imam is understandably nervous. There’s silence as he thinks about what to do, then he nods and gives me the okay, says I can hang out at the mosque as much and as freely as I like, and talk to whomever.

“Thank you.”

◆ Clockwise: Pakistani-born, English-raised Imam Zia has been in Texas since 2005, because that’s where the imam jobs are; Stacy Samuel, originally from Queens, is working on her Ph.D. in Texas; Vincent Simon, a former Marine deployed to Iraq, reminds people that “we didn’t fight against Islam, we fought against bad guys”; Zeena Alkurdi (with her daughter, Kenzi), spends less time on the Internet these days because of the viciousness.

I put my shoes back on and exit the mosque. The sun is out and it feels good on my skin. The hearse is no longer in the parking lot. Instead, there's a lady wearing a head scarf sliding her minivan door open so that her three kids can climb in. A kid on a skateboard cruises by me with his younger sister on roller skates chasing behind him. There's a pigskin being tossed around in the far back parking lot where a group of kids are playing two-hand touch. Scattered throughout the lot are small pockets of people chatting and joking around.

As I exit the parking lot in my vehicle, I stop where the armed protesters assemble with their rifles and signs. I imagine myself in the car with my mother, who's no longer alive, and I'm my son's age, looking curiously out the window and asking my mother what's going on. I'm imagining these protesters holding up anti-Asian or anti-Korean banners, maybe a couple of them flip her off or spit at the car. I witnessed these things as a kid, people being terrible to her because she was Asian. My mom, not being the slightest bit intimidated by this mob, defiantly holds her head up and drives right by them. With her accent, she tells me that they don't like us. When I ask my mother why, I can clearly hear her voice saying to me: "These people have no education."



NOBODY TOLD ME about the hot-ass Muslim women or I might have gotten religion sooner.

The neighborhood around the mosque is like a Muslim Beverly Hills. Enormous McMansions, one right after another, and each appears to belong to a Muslim family. I pull up to the local Mediterranean restaurant. Inside, a young kid greets me with "*Salaam alaikum.*" I ask him why he did that, and he shrugs and says that it's pretty much only Muslims that come to the restaurant.

He seats me at a booth and I bombard him with questions about the Muslims here, then he walks away to go and get me a glass of water. I then hear a female voice ask me, "Are you Colby?"

I look over. She's wearing a head scarf and seated all by herself in the far corner booth. I have no idea who she is, early thirties, dark-skinned and beautiful. Kind of looks like a Bond girl to me and so, playing it cool, I tell her, "Why yes, I'm Colby. Colby Buzzell." She says hello and invites me to come sit at her table. I walk over, Bond music playing in my head.

"I'm Stacy, Vincent's girlfriend," she says. Oh! Vincent is a former Marine I'd met at the mosque, nice guy. She said she had a feeling it was me due to the questions she heard me asking my server.

Stacy Samuel is thirty-two and from the East Coast, with parents from India. Her mother is a nurse and her father is an engineer.



◆ The protesters have a range of grievances—they suspect the mosques of funding terrorism, and they say that they are practicing sharia law. There is no evidence for either. Pictured at bottom is the leader of the protests, David Wright.

Both are Christian. She is currently here in Texas working on a Ph.D. We get to talking, and she is brimming with stories about life as a Lone Star Muslim. She tells me she gets confused when strangers sometimes tell her to "go back to where you came from."

"I'm like, What? You want me to go back to Queens?"

Same goes when people ask her about ISIS.

"That's in Syria," she tells them. "What do you want me to do? Go to Syria and fight ISIS?"

Stacy tells me of how she was at a Starbucks right after the San Bernardino shootings and a middle-aged Caucasian male straight up called her a terrorist to her face. An older African-American man who was there told the guy how out of line that was, how she did nothing wrong. When she thanked the guy for this, he explained to her how he'd experienced the same sort of thing his whole life.

Stacy pulls out her cell phone and hands it to me so I can see a Facebook post a friend of hers just made. Her friend was at Whole Foods shopping for eggs and a white lady tapped her on the shoulder and asked, "Do you really hate me because I am an infidel?" The Muslim girl was shocked and said, "Excuse me?" The lady then said, "I am so sorry to approach you like this, but you looked like such a sweet girl, and this is my first time seeing a real live Muslim. I live in a very small town in West Texas. I just need to know: Do you hate me?" The girl smiled at the lady and said, "No, of course not." They talked there in the Whole Foods, right there between the prepared foods and the expensive coffees, the girl citing the Koran from memory on how she is instructed to love people. "I don't even know what an infidel

is," she said. "I just want to live my life." And the lady said, "I wish the news would show us people like you. Anyways honey, if you are ever in West Texas, please come visit me. I would love to have you." In the post, there's a selfie of the two of them.

Stacy knows of another local Muslim woman whose young daughter heard Donald Trump talking about barring Muslims from entering the country and hasn't been able to sleep because she's afraid of the government coming to their house to deport them all. I stop Stacy midstory and tell her I'd heard about the girl, that everyone's posting about it on Facebook.

"You know her?" I ask.

She nods. "Do you want to meet her?" She also says she will try to get a couple of her other Muslim sisters together for me to talk to.

The next day we meet up at a different Mediterranean restaurant, this one way out in Richardson. Stacy is there with the woman, Melissa Chance Yassini, and a few other Muslim friends.

We're all seated around a round table where I've placed my cell phone, which I'm using to record our conversation. The women also have their cell phones out—cell phones in pink and purple and all the colors of the rainbow, to match their hijabs.

Melissa's head is uncovered, no hijab. She says that when she posted the story of her daughter being afraid, she did it out of frustration and sadness that a little girl would be made to feel so unwelcome in her own hometown, in her own country. She couldn't have anticipated the overwhelming response—hundreds of thousands of strangers flooding in with their support, including hundreds of veterans and active-duty military writing in to say, "We've got your back, Melissa. You tell your daughter not to worry about a thing."



OME OF THEM HAVE LIVED HERE FOR decades, some for only a few years. Even with the protesters and the hostility, none of them has anything negative to say about Texas. They all seem to genuinely love it here.

Sharmina Zaidi, who's seated to my left, explains to me how she's been living in Texas for fifteen years now and how you don't want to leave where you're from. She tells me how it was really a great choice to move here. "I really appreciate how we're a part of the Bible Belt, and how it's so much more conservative here. Coming from Florida, where everyone is half-naked, going to clubs, partying, I feel that there's still the family values here in Texas, so for me as a Muslim, I like that."

Another woman disagrees. "You would think that being a part of the Bible Belt would make us more comfortable here, but it's actually the opposite." She continues, "This is the Bible Belt and you have people very connected with their faith. . . . We're connected with our faith and you would think that would bring us together, but when we connect to our faith, it scares people."

When I ask the table if they've ever had Christians try to convert them, they all laugh and nod yes.

Mehnaz Mahmood, who has a bit of a Jersey accent and is definitely a girl I'd want to roll with, explains how some Christians here think, "Oh, you need to find Jesus. That's why you're carrying all these problems." They think we hate Jesus, and "Oh, they need to find Jesus!" And they don't know that Jesus is a part of Islam, too.

Stacy once had a lady come up to her and say, "I pray that you find Jesus, young girl." Stacy told the woman, "I know you're just being friendly, but I love Jesus, too. You know, I already found Jesus. He's in my life."

Much to my surprise, the women all welcome the protesters, not only into their mosques but just to get to know them as well.

"We love food!" Mehnaz tells me to tell them. "And we love everything that normal people love." Given the chance, they'd ask the protesters to have dinner and talk. They want the protesters to "just come inside, sit down, and find out."

But the ignorant want to stay ignorant, the women say. When you just decide the worst about somebody, it can make you feel good about yourself, in a bizarre way.

A fair number of people in town walk around with "Infidel!" T-shirts on, or drive around in big ol' trucks decorated with "Proud Infidel!" bumper stickers.

Mehnaz shakes her head at this and explains how ridiculous it is. "We don't go around and go, 'Oh, look at that infidel!'" She says, "There's this guy, and he goes to Dunkin' Donuts, and I go there every morning to get coffee, and he was in front of me in line, and he had on his Infidel shirt, and a couple days later I see him again, and I pay for his order and I'm waiting for him to come out so that I could

talk to him and say, 'Hey, I'm just like you.' But he just walks on by, doesn't even look at me."

When I met Vincent Simon, Stacy's boyfriend, he was wearing his Marine Corps ball cap. He also served in Iraq. "Oh yeah," he smiled. "I just tell people we didn't fight against Islam, we fought against bad guys." And yet risking his life on multiple tours of duty aside, the question that will not stop, that Vincent and all of these women get all the time, is: Are you Muslim or American?



HARIA LAW WOULD BE A GREAT NAME

for a death-metal band. Americans are absolutely scared to death of sharia, and there's this fear that sharia is everywhere. Just ask Irving mayor Beth Van Duyne, who was so certain that the mosque here had instituted the first "sharia court" in America that she passed a bill through her city council last year to ban any legal authority in her town that wasn't American. This came after Breitbart published a story entitled "Islamic Tribunal Confirmed in Texas" and got a lot of people down here thinking that Muslims were going to be running around doing all sorts of Muslim things, outside the Constitution, which in turn got the protesters out with their guns, which is yet another reason no one should ever read anything on Breitbart.

Because it turns out that the "sharia court" is more like a mosque council that offers advice on conflict resolution based on sharia, which are rules for living—the same kinds of rules that all religions have for the faithful. And in fact, most churches and synagogues have similar conflict-resolution groups. Most do not attract armed protests. But thanks to Mayor Van Duyne, nonbinding arbitration is now against the law in Irving, Texas. It just feels safer, you know?

And speaking of sharia, Vincent and I make plans to meet in front of the mosque later on that night, and when I arrive, there's a fierce game of cricket going on in the parking lot with many elders and youths joining in. Vincent walks up with another Iraq War veteran who's also a Muslim. His name is Greg. He's a white guy and a convert. He grew up in Minnesota and switched to Islam shortly after attending a Baptist service where he witnessed his pastor saying some "ignorant" things about Muslims. Greg had met many Muslims when he was deployed and knew the stereotypes were wrong. Out of curiosity, he attended a mosque and took to the religion. When I ask what his friends thought of the change, he says, "We stopped hanging out." A job brought him to Texas.

In Vincent's car he asks me, "You're not afraid of guns, are you?" I am, but I tell him no. He says, "Good" and pulls out this Glock pistol that's attached to his belt, concealed under his shirt, and sets it by the door console. I ask if it's loaded and he tells me, "Always."

While on the freeway, Vincent tells me how in just a couple weeks from now, Texas is going to allow open carry. Now I'm terrified. Dear God, I thought. I can't think of anything more scary. People are bad enough with cars, imagine them all going everywhere with guns. I swear, it's as if America wants to resemble a combat zone.

At the Mediterranean restaurant, Vincent greets a table with about six Muslims hanging out drinking tea. One of the bearded guys at the table is wearing a white taqiyah. He's Kurdish and from northern Iraq. He tells me he likes it here in Texas, but the looks he gets can become annoying. People will just stare at him constantly everywhere he goes, especially after there's been a terrorist attack somewhere.

After our meal, we all pack into Vincent's car and he drives us over to Richardson, to another mosque the protesters have hit recently, convinced that the mosque has terrorist connections and has a "well-documented history of funding terrorism." The group's leader, David Wright, actually went ahead and posted in all caps on his Facebook page "the name and [continued on page 150]

Shea states, "I think I really would. I mean, I might as well kill someone. I don't see any reason not to." He is calm, though his voice is unusually halting. "That's just how I'm wired," he says. He says he cannot feel love, not even his parents' love, so love can't stop him. It is a simple declaration. His parents are right there, watching from the couch. Shea says it as if he were reading a stray rule from the instructions of an old board game. "Love has no effect on me."

Sadly, it may be the truest thing he's said. He sits in sweatpants, with a home-detention monitor clamped to his ankle, once again tearing into his parents' peaceable hearts without seeming to know it. He speaks gently, rubs his scalp with the flattened palm of his hand. His glasses slide down the bridge of his nose, giving him the look of a featherless bird. His eyes lower when he covers the particularly tough stuff, the killing stuff. He's autistic, and as such he's often plainly disconnected from what he says. He doesn't seem to know what hurts his parents, and he certainly doesn't seem to know what effect the words he says have on his life or the lives of others. "I'm sitting right here and I will answer questions," he tells me. "But I'm not sure why it matters. I might do anything." And this is how it is, an existential truth tinged by the stagy morality of a slasher movie.

Shelly simply listens and leans back at one end of the couch, her hand flat against her cheek. Gary edges forward, his elbows on his knees. They don't speak to him or interrupt to argue. They've done plenty of that over the years. Right now they want someone else to hear it. They seem delicate and worn in moments like these. They'd have to be. Thirty-four years into the question of how one sick child, and then another—loved by only them—can be expected to go out into the world so completely untreated. A bus pass and a map for the isolated, the feared, the reviled.

What sort of future does Shea face? Much of it depends on the outcome of the child-pornography charges. He's not allowed to return to high school for his senior year until this is resolved. Possibilities for the future include jail time beyond time served, years of registering as a sex offender, more social isolation, difficulty finding work. He knows only this: He will leave. He's hoping for just that much. It seems rational, frankly. There is nothing—no counselor, no knowledgeable advocate, no program—keeping him latched to this community in any fashion besides his financial obligation to the courts. There may well be in a nearby city or a dis-

others by lashing out blindly, is left to define himself as a man. "People talk about me," he says. "They see me as a dangerous figure. That's fine, really. It doesn't bode well, you know, for friends.... So I plan to live alone."

In December, the bill for Shea's home-detention unit comes due, and Shelly and Gary cannot pay. Shea, who can leave the house only to apply for jobs and to work, has been unable to secure employment. He too cannot pay. He performs community service as punishment for not making the payment, but this work does not whittle down the bill for his detention unit. They owe \$325. Two days before Christmas, with county offices set to close for the holiday within the hour, local police arrive to take Shea from his home and remand him to the county jail. Gary brings his medications to the infirmary, where he is told Shea will have to wait a week until they are approved by the medical team. The cycle begins again.

"Honestly, I go to bed wishing my sons had been born without legs, without arms," Shelly later tells me. "A physical handicap that the world can see. Because then I'd know that someone would see them and not blame them. Or blame us for a condition they were born with. Then I could sleep knowing that someone would reach out to them, that they would get the help they need. Because someone would help. People trust what they see. And they're afraid of what they can't."

A third recording, given to me long ago by the father, in which the son reveals the truth about each of us, just after he threatens, yet again, to kill some of us.

And then who knows what I'll do. I'll probably take some people with me, at least, but I'm not living here much longer, I don't think. I've already felt this for a while. I'm feeling it a lot lot stronger after what happened.

Shelly: *Don't do something else that's gonna make you feel even worse. You know, worse things have been done. If you get arrested for this, and charged and all that kind of stuff, but it's not something—that isn't something you can't get over. People have gotten in trouble for way worse. I'm not trying to take any of it off of you. It's still terrible... but it doesn't have to get worse.*

With my attitude, it's going to.

Shelly: *But your attitude can get better.*

No, it can't. It totally can't.

Shelly: *Why not?*

I tried everything... 'cause you know what the problem is? Me. And you can't get away from yourself. So, yeah.

Shea. His words. His parents want to tell him: All of it matters. You, and everything you say. ❧

rorist center, and inside the mosque, there's an older man dressed all in white and seated in a chair. He's telling a story. Sitting on the carpet all around him are Muslim men of various ages, from the elderly to teenagers. I ask Vincent what's going on, and before he can answer, the guy telling the story invites us over to take a seat.

We sit down to listen. The man is captivating, and a generous speaker. No, he's not giving a class on how to properly behead an infidel or doing a Q & A on how to correctly pack a VBIED with explosives. Instead, he's telling a story from the Koran about how to be a good person. The Koran, he says, tries to bring into existence a good citizen who is willing to establish good relations with God, with mankind, and with himself. He's pausing at the right times, making eye contact, his words flowing like lyrics from a good song. I'm impressed. I look back again at the men seated around me, especially the younger guys. When I was their age, I was out skateboarding, drinking, hitting the bong, vandalizing public property, and generally causing mischief. These kids want to be here, and they are mesmerized.

The mosque in Irving has a program called "Open Hearts. Open Minds." It's advertised as "free and open to the public of all faiths." Imam Zia opens his doors for all to see what their congregation is all about and get an opportunity to ask a real Muslim whatever questions they might have. On the day I went, I was the only open mind and heart. There was a sign-up sheet in the lobby on a table next to some flowers in a vase and a basket filled with head scarves for women who didn't have one. I looked at the list and only two people had shown up the prior Sunday. A white guy with a massive beard shows up and introduces himself to me. His name is Nick and he asks if I'm there for the tour. I tell him yes and the reasons why. He walks away and I'm confused until a Chinese guy with a goatee and a white cap comes back to give me a tour of the mosque. The guy has a thick Chinese accent, and I ask him when he converted. He tells me he never converted and that he was born into a Muslim family. School and a job brought him to Texas. Nick is walking beside us while I'm asking my Chinese friend all these questions about Islam. After a while, Nick stops to ask me if I'm playing stupid. He knows that I'm here working on a story, so he looked me up on the Internet and saw I was an Iraq veteran. And so he is wondering if I am pretending not to know anything about Islam for my story.

"No," I tell him. "I'm not pretending. I'm really this stupid. I know nothing."

Irving, Texas

Nick finds this totally amazing, and shakes his head in disbelief when I tell him how they didn't teach us anything about Islam before we deployed or while we were there. I try to explain how we weren't really there for religious studies. And if I know so little about Islam after having done some of my best work in a Muslim country, how little does the average American know?

At the end of the tour, I'm taken to a conference room where I'm shown a PowerPoint presentation on Islam. Kind of boring, but the last slide shown is titled Frequently Asked Questions, which include:

- "Are women oppressed?"
- "Is Islam a violent religion?"
- "Is sharia a threat?"

I think back to those ladies I spoke with. They all proudly referred to themselves as feminists and explained that no guy forced them to wear the hijab. That choice is between them and God. As for Islam being violent, what religion isn't? I think of the Muslim who explained to me that Islam is a religion of peace, but you not only have a right to defend yourself according to Islam, you have an obligation to defend yourself. As for sharia, most of what I knew about the Islamic code was the most extreme manifestations of it, carried out by crazy people—public executions, beheadings, stoning people to death, the kind of stuff that had Irving, Texas, banning sharia law. Vincent schooled me that sharia "is just a code. You live a certain way. You treat your neighbors well... these laws are set down for the governments and well-being of the community. It's no different than Mosaic laws. You're a Christian, you follow the laws of the land as well as the tenets of your faith. Render unto Caesar... Islam is the same. Sharia says when you're in a non-Muslim-majority country, you'll live to the best of your ability by the laws of that country."

When Nick asks if I have any questions, I bring up the fear of the Islamization of America and of sharia law coming into our country. Both men roll their eyes at this. Nick gathers his thoughts. Finally, he says: "This is an overwhelmingly Christian country, with millions and millions of Christians who have been here for years. In spite of that, they still cannot legally stop abortion. So how in the world can a much smaller religious group impose its own laws on this country? The Muslims aren't trying to do that, but even if they were, what are they going to do? Try and go through Congress?" Nick just laughs.

"When I met you, I said, 'Hello, I'm Nick, I'm the new outreach director.' I don't say, 'Hi, I'm Nick, the spokesperson for 1.4 billion people.'" Yet at times, he feels that because he is Muslim, people think of him as such. He is asked about ISIS all the time, as if he's got their number and can speak with them directly.

That's what the armed protesters think, anyway.

The week after Christmas, I drive to a neighboring town, Rowlett, to meet a local

man named David Wright, who is the leader of the protesters. I park my car on a street where half the houses have been destroyed by the tornado. The church has been set up as a disaster-relief center and shelter, and all the local mosques have dispatched volunteers to help those most in need. On foot, I pass relief workers clearing debris and running chain saws to clear the fallen trees. Finally, I get to the CVS parking lot, and I wonder if I'm walking into an ambush when the doors of two parked cars open up. I recognize Wright. And slowly, I recognize the other three individuals from the protest videos that I've studied.

I say hello to the infidels. It is nice to see them all without their guns. I shake Wright's hand first, and then the two youngsters, including the kid who had proudly carried an assault rifle as if he was on a foot patrol in Fallujah, and his buddy, who carried the I'M WITH STUPID sign at the mosque. There is a fourth guy with chewing tobacco all up in his teeth who calls himself Big John.

All proudly tell me that they're born and raised in Texas. They say they've been doing disaster-relief work for the last several days. I have to ask if they'd help a mosque that was destroyed by the tornado. David looks down and smiles. Shaking his head a bit, he looks back up again to say, "Well, it would depend on the mosque. Not if they're funding terrorism."

Wright and his pals are convinced that the Richardson mosque funds terrorist groups, and they have a problem with the Irving mosque's sharia court. These two things, they claim, are why they have targeted these two particular mosques for their protests. Big John says sharia law is "counterintuitive to our Constitution."

"Well, then, you'll be happy to know that you're in no danger of ever living under sharia law," I say. "Of misunderstanding sharia law maybe, but not living under it." I ask if any of them have any friends that are Muslim, or gotten to know any. The kid then enters the conversation.

"Yes, I've spoken to Muslims a couple times, and some of them have threatened to cut my head off."

Can't really say that I blame them, but I call bullshit. Please, God. Somebody send this kid to basic training! Please, let those drill sergeants have their way with this one! I press him on who these Muslims are that want to behead him.

"Well, on Facebook..."

Okay, he's done.

"Shut the fuck up, kid, just shut up." I lose it for a second. Their Internet fantasies and determination for conflict are getting to me.

I find myself pleading with them to de-escalate, that if they don't, good people will get hurt. On Christmas Eve just down the road in Dallas, a man went into Omar's Wheel & Tire, which is owned by a Muslim, and started shooting. He killed one man and wounded several more. The guy had been there a few days before, saying he wanted to kill all the Muslims. When I ask them all if they're wor-

ried about maybe inspiring some nut who agrees with what they are doing but takes it a step further by killing a bunch of Muslims inside a mosque, the kid mutters something under his breath about natural selection, and Big John has had it. "Stop saying stupid shit!" he yells at the kid. "Get back in the car!" And the kid, with his head down, goes to the car and there he stays. I actually like Big John. He's misguided, but I'd hang with him again.

For a couple of hours, we stand in the CVS parking lot in the fading light and argue. At one point, the red-and-blues start flashing. A white sedan parks itself right behind us. A police car wedges itself directly behind the car so that it can't back out. There's a black kid in the car, nineteen or so. Every couple minutes, I turn to monitor the situation. The black kid appears extremely frustrated but cooperative, and now has his hands on the car. An officer searches him, and all his personal items are placed on the trunk of the car. I whisper a prayer that nobody get shot today and go back to arguing with Wright and Big John. Over and over, I try to tell them that their assumptions just aren't true. All the reports I read about the Richardson mosque funding terrorism said the allegations are untrue and everything Big John says about sharia courts is garbage.

Wright confuses the hell out of me by saying, "Bottom line is, I hate people who hate."

"Huh?! But wait, what about you?"

"I haven't said anything hateful to anybody. The only thing I ever said was there's a couple mosques that are up to no good. That's all I ever said. How is that hate speech? I've never said anything other than that."

The words out of your mouth don't matter as much as the assault rifle in your hand, I say. I don't know, that just might give some people the impression that you hate Muslims. Wright shrugs it off and says, "It's not our fault that these people don't understand the Constitution. I have the right to protest—that's my First Amendment right—my Second Amendment right says I have a right to carry a rifle anywhere I want, especially in Texas, because Texas state law backs up the Second Amendment. It says I have a right to do that."

"What about Muslims?" I ask. "Don't they have the right to freedom of religion?"

Wright explains how he's not stopping them from practicing their religion. And of course that's true—he's just making them fear for their lives. Imam Zia told me that far fewer people showed up on the day Wright and his boys showed up because they were scared. I also point out that a lot of families with kids go to the mosque. What is he saying to those kids who see guys out there with guns, threatening them? I ask what he thinks of people having to tell their kids, "Oh, those people with the guns, they hate us."

"No, then they're not telling them the truth," Wright tells me. "That's not our fault that they don't tell their children the truth. The truth is the mosque funds terrorism, and that's why we're there. The mosque has a sharia court that operates under foreign laws. That's why we're there."

standing everything around them and making grave decisions based on those misunderstandings. I try to share what I've been seeing and experiencing all week at the mosque. I tell them that Muslims are just people doing their thing, living their lives, raising their kids, saving for retirement, getting frustrated by the lousy season the Cowboys had, praying, and just being American.

Wright brings up the guy and his wife in San Bernardino. He claims that just praying is what those shooters were doing, too. "That's what they were doing in San Bernardino until that Christmas party came up and they didn't like the ham on the table. So then, you know, they decided it was time to mow down fifteen Americans."

Of course, the existence of actual crazy Muslims, those whose exception proves the rule, will make it impossible to ever fully rebut these guys, however misguided their beliefs.

Except to say, of course, that what they're doing is not the American way. In this country, we judge you on your merits as an individual, not as a member of a group.

I tell them that they're all more than welcome to go down to the mosque and get to know a Muslim, just as long as they leave their guns at home. They claim that they've tried to do just that, but the people at the mosque have said that's not true. The first time anyone at the Islamic Center of Irving ever saw any of these guys, they all had semiautomatic rifles slung over their shoulders.

The sun is now down and it's dark. The only light coming is from the streetlamps and it's getting cold. The black kid has been sitting on the curb the whole time we talked, as the police ransacked his car. The officers just finished up whatever they were doing and took off, leaving the kid looking dazed. He gets in his car and slowly pulls away. It can be dangerous out here.

I thank Wright and Big John for their time and shake their hands, but instead of getting back in our cars and driving away, we all stand around and talk for a while longer. We even share a few laughs and smiles. They tell me all about the KKK members who showed up to their protest, and how they were trying to recruit people. They make jokes about how stupid they were.

Walking back to my car, I find there's debris from destroyed homes scattered all over the streets. It's a bit of a disaster here in this country.

On my way back home, I can't help but think that if the armed protests continue—and Wright tells me that they will—one of these days someone here is going to get killed.

And I think about the kindergarten class and all the kids with the huge smiles, all of them my son's age. ■


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