

Martin R. Stone

QUEENS NOIR

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EDITED BY

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Published by Akashic Books

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Series concept by Tim McLoughlin and Johnny Temple

Queens map by Sohrab Habibion

Editorial and technical assistance by Carrie Beehan

ISBN-13: 978-1-933354-40-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007926099

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First printing

Akashic Books

PO Box 1456

New York, NY 10009

info@akashicbooks.com

www.akashicbooks.com

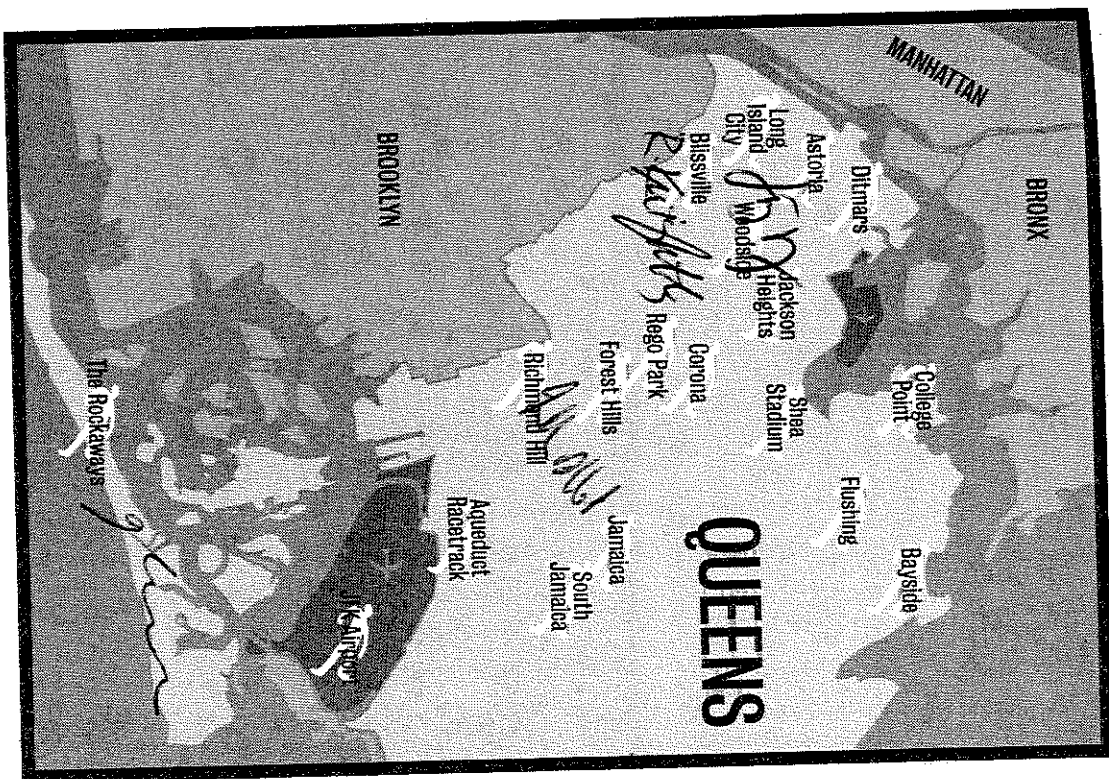


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committed suicide while in protective custody at the federal Metropolitan Correctional Center. "Mr. Hernandez appears to have wound a bedsheet around the top bunk in his cell and used it to strangle himself," Guzman reported at a press conference late yesterday afternoon.

Other members of the alleged fraud ring include Alba Terremoto, Pedro Volcan, and Mohammed al-Yakub, who is also suspected of having links to al-Qaeda and is charged with funneling profits from illegally sold merchandise into terrorist activities.

~~Saleh~~ ~~Richmond Hill~~

This story of an Al Qaeda mole
in Richmond Hill tangled
from the path of Saleh
by the fleshpods of Queens

A crowd
of winter
implies
spring or terrorists

JHAD SUCKS; OR, THE CONVERSION OF THE JEWS

BY JULIAN ABBOTT
Richmond Hill

Be...
par...
par...

TALK A
REAT
G- par...

Ramzi Saleh wondered how this nation had become the most powerful in the world. The despicable littleurchins who turned up to harass him at Richmond Hill High, where he taught math to ninth graders, were indifferent to his lessons. They cheated him of his time on earth.

It was with no little pleasure that he contemplated being an instrument of their demise, those cocksure boys and strutting girls. Now that winter had set in and the sidewalks were treacherous with ice, he was spared the exposed flesh that assaulted him every warm day. What sort of parents let their daughters out wearing less than what would pass for acceptable underwear at home? And the boys were little better. He found their lack of modesty and wayward attitudes blasphemous.

Ramzi pulled the collar of his overcoat tight against a biting wind. Above him, the 7 train rattled by, its brakes screeching as it pulled into the Roosevelt Avenue station. Beneath his feet the sidewalk trembled. Two levels underground, a subway train, maybe the E he'd just gotten off, was pulling up or leaving.

He knew no one here, at least not in person. He kept walking, and soon caught a whiff of fennel as he approached his destination: the *paan* seller on 74th Street. It seemed that

Satan himself had a hand in his being here. How else could he explain the impulse that had propelled him to the E train? He told himself that he was going to pray, but when he got to Surphin Boulevard, instead of leaving the station and making his way along Jamaica Avenue toward Azis's mosque tucked away on 146th Street, he'd raced onto the E, which brought him straight here to Roosevelt Avenue, Jackson Heights.

This neighborhood meant peril. At how many points along the way could he have abandoned his quest and gone to Azis's, or even home to Liberty Avenue? But now his destination was Little India. He stopped outside the *paan* shop. Why not? He'd resisted for as long as he could, but the first time he'd slid the *paan* inside his cheek to an explosion of flavor, he'd known he was lost.

He was supposed to avoid his countrymen and spend his time among the *gora*. Not that Richmond Hill was Infidel Central. But many of the Asians there were West Indians who had lived in the Caribbean for generations before coming to America. The neighborhood was mixed, not exclusive, and while the ~~you~~ shops had few rituals, the *paan* could not compete. He should take it home. He should eat it unobserved in his recliner, but he couldn't.

At times it seemed to Ramzi that America offered nothing but temptation. Could a man be wise, let alone moral, living among such sirens? Was his sophisticated Jackson Heights palate evidence that the Great Satan had corrupted him? Perhaps he should buy two *paan*? One for now, and one he could put in the fridge for after dinner.

As he pressed toward the *paan* seller, his worst fear was realized: He recognized a man ahead of him in the line. They had been at camp together in Afghanistan. The fellow licked his lips and inched closer to the booth as if mesmerized by the

vendor's red-gummed grin and nimble fingers as he smeared red *kathha* and *churna* on a fresh betel leaf. The veins in Ramzi's neck throbbed. Even if the fellow recognized him, they would not acknowledge each other.

His breath quickened. Their time at camp was long ago, and he wondered if this man was part of the same mission? He knew little about his task other than that he was to assimilate and wait. On that glorious day of victory, when, with the rest of the world, he'd watched the Twin Towers fall, he'd hoped his time among the infidels would end. But it was not to be.

The man from camp took his *paan*, looked around with the sly delight of a thief, and, using his thumb, thrust it inside his cheek and disappeared into the throng.

The *paan* seller remembered Ramzi. "*Meeha paan*, no *conut*," he said, his eyes bright with the pride of a man who knows his customers.

Despite his inward panic at being known, Ramzi smiled and nodded. "How do you do it?" he asked. "Every time, your *paan* is delicious."

"It is all in the balance of *churna* and *kathha*," the *paan* seller said, rolling his head from side to side as he smeared a leaf with his special *masala*.

The proportion of betel nut to lime paste was crucial to a good *paan*, but Ramzi came to this fellow for his perfect *masala*—no one around mixed the spices and chutneys quite like he did. Now he behaved as if Ramzi was one of his regulars. Was that good or bad? To leave one or two footprints might be for the best. Ramzi imagined the Queens Chronicle story following his mission . . . They'd quote this man. A *paan* seller on 74th Street described Ramzi Saleh as a polite man, quiet and predictable. "He loved my meetha paan, but it was always, 'Hold the cocunut.'" Ramzi smiled to himself. Not a bad epitaph.

He stuffed the folded packet inside his cheek and turned toward the street to watch the bustle of rush-hour traffic nudge by. The heady smells of curry leaves, cardamom, and incense wafted from the many restaurants and swirled around him. In his time at Richmond Hill High, he had not met one child—well, there was one—who was grateful for the education his cover required him to provide. His teaching was scrupulously average, he knew. His biggest challenge: to remain invisible.

He had a talent for teaching. He had been plucked from the rubble of an earthquake, all his parents' properties ruined, and had been educated by the charity of the Great Satan itself. But it had promised and not delivered. Before the earthquake his family had been among the wealthiest in the village; afterwards they had nothing. When the American aid workers left, he was no longer hungry and ignorant, he was hungry and educated.

When the *mujahideen* entered his village in western Pakistan as they fled the Russians, he had seen fear in the village elders' eyes. He had vowed to teach all who wished to learn, so that no Pakistani would ever again know ignorance and hunger, but he was still hungry himself, as were all his pupils. He craved to be the cause of that fear he saw in his elders—he saw the respect it inspired. From the day he joined the jihad, he lost the knowledge of hunger. That was nearly twenty years ago.

Saliva stimulated by the *paan* built in his mouth and he spat a stream of red liquid onto the sidewalk. Behind him a door opened and Hindi music spilled out to compete with the sounds of traffic. Ramzi's nose twitched at the blasphemy. Bloody Hindus with their Devil's music, idolatry, and fuzzy logic. *There is no God but Allah. Praise be to Allah.* And yet

lounging in the street, chewing *paan*, and feeling contemptuously superior to Hindus brought a deep comfort and satisfaction to Ramzi. Oddly, it was like going home—his real home, not the squat little one-bedroom, eat-in-kitchen apartment on 115th Street off Liberty Avenue. There were Hindus in Richmond Hill, but not nearly so many. He lingered to drink in the sights of brazen, sari-clad Hindu whores, their faces fully exposed to him, and to the world.

Allah is merciful. He led Ramzi to Azis. Azis had helped him find the righteous path. At the training camp he had learned the art of destruction. The American education taught him that he would always be less than they were. When the time came he would play his part.

The earthquake had taken everything from his parents and denied him his future as a landowner. But this loss left him free for jihad. In due course, the Americans would lose their livelihoods. Husbands would lose wives, though Ramzi wondered if that would cause them pain. He doubted it. In this godforsaken nation, whores were elevated and virtuous women despised. A young girl in *sadhar-kameez* skipped by clutching her mother's hand. Something about her brought back the image of his laughing sister the day before the kitchen collapsed on her, and a sharp pain stabbed at his chest as if someone had slammed a knife into his heart. Soon their sisters would be taken away: a mass of bloody, twisted bodies and tangled limbs all that remained.

The Great Satan was so naive—had helped him to immigrate when he had shown them his certificate from the Peace Corps. And now, between his salary as a teacher and his payments from al-Qaeda, he would be able to take another wife, maybe two—virtuous Muslim women to keep his current wife, Fatima, company and produce more *mujahideen* for the cause.

A group of women wearing saris and *salwar-kameez* glided by. How much more beautiful and elegant than the jeans and T-shirts of Richmond Hill. He should not have come to this neighborhood. The sight of these glorious hussies stirred long-dormant yearnings in Ramzi and he silently cursed himself for giving into temptation. Tears welled in his eyes, but he steeled himself. He missed his wife and children, and understood he might not live to see them again, let alone take another wife. He had pledged his life to this holy war and would do whatever was asked.

He turned back toward the subway and headed for Azis, exchanging the noise and crush of the street for the noise and crush of Mexicans, blacks, and West Indians packed like sardines into the E. Perhaps there would be word. Perhaps today his long wait would end.

He remembered the anticipation he felt when he first arrived in Queens. Back then, he thought his mission was imminent, and he would take the stairs down from the J train two at a time in his rush to get to the mosque. Always his heart pounded in his chest as he waited for Azis. Was today the day? He would catch Azis's eye, his own face hot with anticipation, but Azis would shake his head discreetly and lower his eyes. Ramzi waited. He undertook reconnaissance as instructed. He reported to Azis. Time passed. In his daily life he was indistinguishable from every other Pakistani immigrant. Familiar, reliable, recognizable, known by no one.

He knew that he should stop by the mosque on the way home. There was no excuse. He'd be tight there at Sutphin Boulevard and Jamaica Avenue. But he felt no enthusiasm, no anticipation. Jihad had become rather like his day job. He went through the motions.

By the time he got to Liberty Avenue it was dark, and

the roadway was treacherous to cross. In the shade of the elevated A line, the ice never melted, and if he slipped and fell in his haste to be out of the cold, it wouldn't be the first time. He turned onto 115th Street and climbed the steps to his front door. In his mailbox he found the usual array of bills and magazines. He clicked his tongue. What a country this was, so many magazines, so much information. The day an issue of the *Herald* arrived in his isolated village, the men would gather at the tea house and Ramzi would read it out loud. It was never less than six months out of date, but they were hungry for its wealth of knowledge.

The *Smithsonian* had arrived. He went inside and dropped into his recliner. Such luxury, if only Fatima could see his leather chair. He flipped through the magazine to examine the pictures. Then he read the headlines and breakout paragraphs. He always did this to decide the order in which he'd read the articles. Then he'd put on a pot of coffee, slide back into his recliner, and read every word. Today he broke his routine. Five pages in he found a piece on the science of biological weaponry. The infidel never tired of telling him all he needed to know. He would not rise again until he'd read it at least twice.

Ramzi Saleh basked in the fortune of having the staff room at Richmond Hill High all to himself. This was a first. The place was always overcrowded and stuffy. Heat blasted from the radiator, and the musty odor of too many bodies lingered. Ramzi headed for the coffee machine, found a clean cup—*Praise be to Allah, this is a great day*—poured his coffee, heaped in four spoons of sugar and extra cream, and made his way toward his cramped cubbyhole at the back of the room. He raised his mug in thanks for the twenty-five-percent absentee rate due to Monday flu and dropped into his chair. Just as he finished ar-

ranging his desk exactly the way he liked it—coffee on the left, pens on the right—he heard the door fly open. Too good to last. The sound of women's voices reached him over the thump and hiss of the radiator. He identified them instantly. Beryl Johnson was a science teacher; Lucy Gruber a fellow math teacher. They kept chatting. Perhaps they couldn't see him back here.

"You're too ordinary?" Lucy said. "Hello. He's an assistant manager at Home Depot."

"Manager. They promoted him just before he left." Ah, thought Ramzi, they were talking about Beryl's husband. What a scoundrel. He'd run out on her two years ago for a girl just six years older than their daughter. Why would he do such a thing? Beryl was a nice enough woman, nothing special, but for an infidel whore she had a good heart. It never ceased to surprise Ramzi the way even the most humble citizens here tried to live like movie stars—to their ruin.

He should speak up, let his presence be known, but the godless fornicators fascinated him, so he continued to eavesdrop. As they loitered by the coffee machine, Ramzi could see their bobbing shadows on the linoleum.

"It makes me sick to admit I went to an online dating site, but what could I do? I was so lonely," Beryl said, her voice choked with emotion. "I wanted someone to hold me, to be tender."

"I know," Lucy replied.

Ramzi detected a catry undertone. Beryl should hold her tongue—this Lucy was no friend, and besides, why would anyone publicize their shame in this way? Living among the godless affected him, moderating his true beliefs. He knew Beryl was contemptible, but he pitied her anyway. He had known her from his first day at this school. He had been bewildered,

not knowing where to go and what to do, and Beryl had found him wandering in the corridor.

She took him to his classroom and introduced him to his students. She had a way about her that put Ramzi at ease. He felt he could talk to her about almost anything. An involuntary shudder moved through him as he thought back to that day. He had told her more about himself than he ever meant to. After that, she had adopted him, helping him become part of the school community, helping him to follow his prime directive: *Blend in, attract no notice.*

"This isn't the place. We can't talk here, someone might overhear," Beryl said.

Ramzi scrunched himself up as small as he could, even gritting his teeth and grimacing like a kid trying to make himself invisible. He didn't dare look in their direction.

"Look. It's empty—not a soul here. Come on, you're going to crack up if you don't tell someone."

"I'm so ashamed," Beryl said between sobs. "When I started it wasn't so bad. I mean, I thought it was terrible, those boring dates with fat guys. But this one, Mike, he didn't just rape me, he beat the hell out of me, and then robbed me."

"You should have said something. When was this?"

Ramzi craned his neck in their direction to hear better.

"The beginning of summer. The marks faded just in time for the start of school in September." Beryl's sobs drowned out the wheezing radiator.

Lucy responded with those little clucking noises women make when they comfort each other. The thought of someone raping Beryl brought heat to Ramzi's cheeks. Who would do such a thing? Beryl's rape caused him a dilemma. Yes, he knew the infidel whore deserved what she got—she was divorced, a matter of shame for any decent Muslim woman.

She had brought shame to her whole family, in fact. Yet Beryl was kind, and raised her children with no help from their father. Though jihad had separated him from his Fatima, she was provided for and had staff to help run the household. If he died in jihad, she would be taken care of, and if, Allah forbid, he fell out with Azis, he had paid a great uncle in Karachi enough to ensure she would disappear and be safe. But no one was there for Beryl. Ramzi struggled for control of his mind. He must banish thoughts of Beryl's goodness. Her loneliness presented him with an opportunity. Her fate was in Allah's hands.

"But what was the alternative? I was lonely. Do you know how many single women there are out there? I didn't stand a chance. Who'd look at me?" Beryl said, a bitter edge to her voice.

Ramzi had looked closely at Beryl when they first met, and he liked what he saw. Though a bit older than he, she was still a handsome woman. Rich, black hair (although he knew it was probably dyed, as all of the women in this country colored their hair), complemented by deep blue eyes. A soft face, lines around the eyes and mouth. To him the lines indicated character.

Beryl had a lush figure, and this was so much more appealing than the skinny, barren women so highly prized here. American women were either stick-thin or waddling giants. The women of Islam were robust and fertile.

Beryl blew her nose loudly, bringing Ramzi back to the present. He struggled to keep his breath even, to remain undetected. Before either spoke again, the school bell went off. The room would be crowded within minutes.

"Come on," Lucy said. "Let's get out of here."

He heard the door flung open. Teachers flooded into the

room, talking, laughing, heading for their desks. Ramzi, with two free periods back-to-back, waited until the room filled up to slip out.

Ramzi knelt on the carpet in the corner of the large prayer room at the mosque. Azis, his imam, knelt next to him, smiled indulgently, and took Ramzi's hand in his. The warmth and strength of Azis's touch comforted Ramzi.

Ramzi guessed the imam was in his mid-forties, the wiry black beard showing streaks of gray. Azis's leathery skin fit tight over his facial bones, a result of early deprivation, a testament to years of living in the harsh light of Pakistan's mountains. He had a cruel mouth and Ramzi was pleased he could not see Azis's eyes. The times when he had, he'd been unnerved by the black void that stared back at him. *Warm, hands, cold heart.*

"I'm confused," Ramzi said, searching the room with his eyes. It was empty but for the rich, blood-red carpet and three low squat desks along the opposite wall. The faint odor of working men emanated from the worn rug.

Azis stroked the back of Ramzi's hand with his index finger. Ramzi watched this, and for the first time in his life he felt uncomfortable with the physicality of it. Among the people of the Great Satan, when one man touched another it led to the abomination of homosexuality. But in Pakistan, men never hesitated to express their affection and concern for one another in this way. Watching Azis's hand, Ramzi wondered if this was how Adam felt once he had eaten from the forbidden tree. The Great Satan corrupted all that was good, even to the point of undermining the purity of his contact with Azis.

"If your feelings for this woman are strong, you should take her," Azis counseled, "but remember that Americans

pride themselves on turning their wives and daughters into whores, and that any goodness you see in her is an illusion. This woman, the Jew, Beryl, is a whore."

Ramzi glanced then at Azis. Being an imam had freed Azis from the need to assimilate. The infidel seemed to expect him to retain his ethnicity, and he hadn't disappointed. His perfectly white turban was arranged so skillfully it appeared to be an extension of his brow. Azis wore a long beard which extended to his ears. He shaved it almost to the edge of his jaw line, leaving his face exposed and causing the beard to jut out at an angle from his chin that gave Ramzi the impression that Azis's face grew out of his facial hair instead of the other way around. Azis shifted slightly and the glare left the bifocals he habitually wore. Ramzi saw that Azis was contemplating him fondly.

Ramzi turned his hand over, allowing him to wrap his fingers around Azis's. Why had he doubted? He let his breath out and with it went his anxiety about Beryl. *Allah is all-knowing.* Azis was wise indeed. Richmond Hill High bragged at its role in producing fallen women. Mae West and Cynidi Lauper were two of its proudest alumni. He need not fear becoming too involved with the hussy, Beryl.

He smiled at Azis, who smiled back.

"You came to me with the idea to take this Jew woman. It is a good idea. It will deepen your cover, and I see in your eyes you know it is right. Now that you are sure, there are things I must tell you, things you need to know about these fornicating She-Devils . . ."

A week later, Ramzi waited by the staff room door. "Heading out?" he asked, trying to sound casual when he saw Beryl. He fell in with her as she left for the day. When he pushed the

door open for her, his jaw was tight and his stomach fluttered. It was ridiculous; he was forty years old, after all. Beryl wore a tight skirt and a low-cut blouse, and as she sauntered along beside him her coat flared open revealing cleavage. Ramzi looked away discreetly. "How's it going?" he asked.

"Not bad. How are you doing with 9B? Have they settled down?"

"Yes, thanks to you. You told me to get on top of Kasan and you were right. Once he was under control the others fell in line."

Beryl grinned. "He's a tough customer that one. Way too big and strong for his years. His father is in the Russian mafia." Ramzi raised his eyebrows and shook his head as if he were shocked, although he knew all about Kasan's connections.

Beryl's heels clicked pleasantly to the end of the hallway and then stopped as she paused inside the door to do up her coat. Their eyes met and Ramzi smiled at her. He felt a pang of guilt. But why? Beryl was an infidel hussy, and he had Azis's dispensation. Ramzi opened the outside door and held it for her. As Beryl passed him, he caught a whiff of perfume. It brought to mind lilacs and spring.

The air was frigid, turning their breath into clouds of vapor. Azis's warning haunted him. He caught himself staring at Beryl. He blushed and forced himself to focus on the ground as they walked in silence to her car. The moody sky threatened snow, and it would be dark by 4:30 p.m. Beryl drew her scarf tight around her neck. Her cheeks, ears, and the tip of her nose had turned red; her beauty made him ache. If her husband were a real man, if he'd stuck by his wife, then Ramzi could never have contemplated using her in this way. The thought that it was Jeff's fault, not his, comforted him.

Taking a woman would help deepen his cover. Handled

correctly, it would make him even more invisible. Beside an American woman, his surveillance wouldn't draw suspicion. And there were other benefits. He could go to the beach and to the Museum of Natural History and all the other places in New York he wanted to see, but felt too conspicuous to go alone.

Beryl pushed the key into her car door. It was now or never. He cleared his throat.

"Beryl, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to dinner and a movie this Saturday night?"

She looked confused, then slightly amused—he had been too formal, he knew. He had met Fatima on their wedding day; today was the first time in his life he had asked a woman out. He was more nervous than he expected to be and cursed himself for this.

She smiled. "Dinner and a movie. Why not?"

It was all Ramzi could do not to high-five her.

Ramzi swept inside the mosque amid a flurry of coats and scarves and wet umbrellas. Azis stood against the wall surrounded by his followers. Ramzi tried to control his expression. He wanted to appear his usual calm self but his emotions were in turmoil. He raised his eyebrows in inquiry when he caught the imam's eye. Azis shook his head and lowered his gaze.

Back on the street, Ramzi realized Beryl's acceptance had left him cranky. A woman her age shouldn't be dating at all. Azis had not only approved his plan to take a woman, he had encouraged it. But now Ramzi no longer wanted to go through with it.

The wind picked up, and icy needles attacked his exposed cheeks. He moved quickly and almost went flying when his

foot hit ice and shot out in front of him. By the time he got to his apartment, he was moving at a steady trot. He paused on his stoop, ripped open his mailbox, and flipped through the contents. He sweated and his legs twitched from the run. What must it feel like? His breathing didn't slow even though he'd been still for several minutes. To his eternal shame, there was movement in his trousers. He must complete his mission and leave this country. But first, dinner and a movie with Beryl.

Ramzi squeezed Beryl's hand. To think he'd once dreaded dating her. She had become as familiar to him as his leather recliner. Today she wore her cobalt-blue jacket open, revealing a long-sleeved T-shirt that looked perfect with her jeans and sneakers.

He parked on Utopia Parkway near the off-ramp of the Cross Island Parkway. Behind them was an entrance to Little Bay Park that followed the water's edge to Fort Totten and then on to the Bayside Marina. On his first visit he had discovered that if you keep walking south, the path leads beneath the Long Island Rail Road and up onto Northern Boulevard.

He got out of the car, opened the trunk, and grabbed a picnic basket and blanket. Beryl scanned for the entrance. Along the road, just inside the park, was a dark wooded area where the spring grass was unkempt, and several ragged trees made it seem unwelcoming.

"Follow me," Ramzi said. He headed back up toward the off-ramp and waited for her by two rectangular brick piles that marked the entry to the park. "This is the back way, but you get a nice view of the bridge and water."

"How do you know so many beautiful places? I've lived in Queens all my life and I never knew this was here," Beryl said. As they entered the park, Ramzi touched his finger to

his lip to silence her. A crumbling concrete trail began at the entrance, but petered out within fifty yards of the gate, leaving them to walk through grass. Ramzi breathed in the scent. Fresh cut grass, blossoms, and manure, it all added up to spring. It was barely April, but the forecast said seventy, and already it was warm and sunny. The sky was the richest blue, and the water, though grayish-green, was mirror-still, reflecting the bridge.

"I came from the mountains in what is almost desert, not this lush green and expanse of water," he said by way of explanation.

Had he made a mistake? Yes, it was a good idea to use this woman for cover, but he should have chosen a more brazen, less likeable one. It was a constant struggle to keep her at a distance. It troubled him. He had to remind himself this was a She-Devil, however kind, and that he was performing his duty to Allah by deceiving her. But he couldn't banish the thought that she was a good woman trapped in an evil culture. He felt her round hip rub against his, and despite himself he was aroused. The first time they'd slept together he'd been terrified. He had listened to Azis's warning, and read *New York* magazine every week. The sexual habits of New Yorkers repelled, yet fascinated him.

He had been content with his wife. In truth, sex wasn't something he'd given much thought to before coming to live in Queens. Americans seemed obsessed with it, as if it were the most important thing in the world. It was true that he enjoyed sex. When he and Fatima did it, he felt close and safe. No one in Pakistan ever talked about love. That was something for the blasphemers of Bollywood to churn out in their endless stream of movies. Seeing Fatima was often accompanied by a feeling of warmth and longing, and if he'd ever given

it any thought, he'd have been happy to call that love.

Beryl turned to him and smiled. He knew she looked forward to these outings. She'd lost fifteen pounds from the exercise and claimed to be fitter than she'd been in years. Even in winter, Ramzi had led her along the water's edge, although one day in early March he'd had to abandon his plans because the path was slick with ice. Instead, he'd taken her on a luxury water cruise. He felt a twinge of guilt when he remembered Beryl that night—giggling like a schoolgirl, posing for his pictures. She couldn't have guessed that the true subject of those photos were the bridges and buildings and port facilities in the background. He'd taken enough photos to fill a 256MB memory card. Their expeditions became more frequent as the weather warmed up. They'd explored the whole length of the Long Island waterfront from the Brooklyn Bridge to today's outing at the Throgs Neck Bridge.

"What's that?" Ramzi asked, pointing to a chicken-wire enclosure about the size of a residential building block.

The park was crowded with people, some lone walkers, some in groups, and some on bicycles. The slope down to the water was dotted with sunbathers who had dragged fold-up chairs to the park and sprawled in their swimsuits. Two women in leotards power-walked, while another couple glided by on rollerblades. Inside the enclosure he'd pointed at, the grass had been worn to dirt. It was mobbed with people and dogs, and the stench of animal excrement, fur, dog breath, and urine wafted from it.

"It's a dog run."

"A what?"

"A dog run. In New York City you have to keep your dog leashed most of the time. Inside that, you can let it run free."

"Really?" Ramzi was appalled. In his country, dogs were

rabid curs. Here they were more pampered than children.

They made their way down the gentle, sloping lawn toward the path, and met up with it under the bridge's pylons. The tide was low and the air had a decidedly fishy tinge to it.

"Look at this bridge," he said. "What a magnificent achievement. Look at the pylons, they're solid. And the cables could hold it up on their own."

"I suppose I should be grateful we're not discussing piston engines," Beryl said.

Ramzi turned his attention from the bridge to his companion. He glared at her. "You know how much I admire these bridges, not just the engineering either, they are magnificent." He slid his arm around her. They passed under the bridge and beside some soccer fields where elementary and middle school children batted it out. The shouts from the parents fought with the noise of the traffic on the bridge overhead.

Ramzi's mission loomed before him, and the thought of it filled him with dread. The longer he stayed here, the harder it was to maintain his rage. Jihad had saved him from shiftlessness and had given him direction. Of course, he despised Beryl, but until he started to date her he hadn't realized how much he missed a woman's touch. Then, despite himself, Beryl had begun to mean something to him. In time, he began to know the infidel, and had developed a liking for many of them.

Beryl's hand crept around his waist and she kissed his cheek as they strolled along. At the same time, he was fully cognizant that a war was being fought and he had chosen a side. Beryl was a weapon the Great Satan had abandoned in the field. He had merely picked it up where it lay and was putting it to good use.

They rounded a bend. "Let's look for a place to eat," Beryl said. There was a hilly section where man-made mounds of

earth had long since become part of the landscape; grass and trees grew on them.

"Let's eat up there on the plateau," he suggested. "That way you can watch the view and I can watch the soccer." Ramzi laid out the blanket and Beryl spread the food on it. She'd made sandwiches, brought sodas, and packed grapes into Ziploc bags. She'd gotten used to Ramzi not drinking alcohol, and had given it up herself. For dessert, she'd bought a pie at The Stork in College Point.

After they ate, Ramzi lay his head on her lap and stared at the sky. Several trees were just coming into blossom and filled the air with a heady but pleasant scent. Immediately, an image of Beryl on her knees before him, her mouth clamped firmly around his penis, came to mind. He remembered the fear he felt when she did it the first time. Ramzi had never hit a woman, but looking down on Beryl's soft, shiny hair, her head bobbing at his crotch, he wanted to knock her across the room and scream, *Have you no pride, woman? No fear of God?* Azis had given Ramzi absolution when he first warned him this would happen. They had prayed together. In the end, Ramzi grew too ashamed to face Azis. Perhaps God would forgive him. After all, he had submitted to serve Allah. But Beryl would go to Hell.

He feared telling Azis the worst. This abomination had given him the most intense pleasure of his life, while the shame crushed him. How could he ever speak with a decent Muslim woman again? Azis's dispensation meant nothing. He was tainted, dirty, and the shame of it would never leave him.

"It's so beautiful, isn't it?" Beryl said. He turned his face toward hers and hoped his anguish didn't show. "Not compared to you."

"Flatterer."

"Truth-teller."

"You are free next Sunday, right? There's no reason to miss my mother's party. You'll enjoy it, it's a fundraiser for the Jewish orphans of Kazakhstan. That's your part of the world."

Ramzi didn't bother to hide his annoyance. "Oh yes, Pakistani Muslims and Kazakh Jews, we are almost brothers. And clearly we all look the same to the Jews of Scarsdale, New York." He had bolted upright, his muscles tense and his neck throbbing.

"Oh Ramzi, this is America, that sort of thing doesn't matter. Besides, the only religion I've seen you practice is the same one I do—lapsed. Lapsed Jew, lapsed Muslim, what's the difference?"

Ramzi had no retort. In truth, he could not be bothered to find one.

"She wants to raise money to bring the orphans here for six months to get the medical help they need and to learn English, math, and Hebrew so they might get a better start in Israel. My mother's getting on. She thought maybe you could teach them. We both could. Maybe we could move in with her and look after her and teach the Kazakh children. You speak Aramaic."

"How do you know I speak Aramaic?"

"You told me, remember? The first day at school when you were lost and I told you some of our students were from central Asia."

He'd forgotten. What other lapses was he guilty of? It was all too much for him. Great *leiwot* and *off tapuzim* to die for was one thing, but no amount of knish was sufficient to entice him to embrace the Jews, except for Beryl, of course. Then Ramzi had the merest glimmer of a thought.

"All right already," he said, taking pride in his mastery of

New York speak, "I'll come to the party. But only if you let me take your picture."

Beryl laughed good-naturedly.

"Stand here," he said, positioning her so that his shorts would take in the undercarriage of the bridge.

While she fussed and clucked over her hair, he took a dozen photos, from all angles. Beryl wasn't in half of them.

As Ramzi walked home on Liberty Avenue that same evening, he spied standing in a doorway the same man he'd recognized so many weeks ago at the *paan* sellers. As their eyes met, the man left the cover of the storefront and slowly approached, his right hand inside his overcoat even though it was much too warm to be dressed that way.

The man was called Mohammed, Ramzi recalled in a flash. He had been foolish and naïve to think he could avoid Aziz. He would not get away that easily. The best he could hope for was that Mohammed had come to question his absence from the mosque. Mohammed's expression gave Ramzi little reason to hope for the best. If he made a run for it now, he would die. He would never see Beryl again. Then he admitted the truth to himself: He had abandoned jihad. He was a changed man, an infidel, a fornicator. He wanted to live.

"There is no God but Allah. Praise be to Allah," Ramzi said in greeting.

"The true believers are those only who believe in Allah and His messenger and afterward doubt not, but strive with their wealth and their lives for the cause of Allah. Such are the sincere," Mohammed said, closing the distance between them.

Ramzi knew the quote from the Qur'an, and the guilt it produced in him squeezed his chest like a vice. At first he thought

to reply: *Allah, most gracious, most merciful*, but that implied a certain culpability, and so instead he said, "Allah is all-knowing, all-aware."

He approached Mohammed, careful to keep his movements steady and nonthreatening.

Mohammed's face flashed uncertainty, and taking advantage of this brief moment, Ramzi added, "I have taken a woman." His tone meant to convey that this explained everything.

"A Jew," Mohammed said, his mouth pulled tight with contempt.

"A whore," Ramzi agreed, although it pained him to speak the words. "A controlling She-Devil to whom I must account for my every movement. And yet, Aziz knows the value of the hussy and encouraged me to take her."

"No man cowers before a woman. What have you become?" Mohammed's small eyes narrowed to slits and his glare felt like a laser beam slicing into Ramzi. He moved toward Ramzi.

"I serve Allah through jihad. That is who I am," Ramzi said, standing very still. He hung his head as if the shame of his dalliance with Beryl was tangible weight.

"You are a favorite with Aziz. I have seen him have a man killed for less than what you have done. I would be happy to oblige my imam should he change his mind. You are expected at the mosque tomorrow at 4:00 p.m. Fail to come and I will be given my chance." He took two more steps toward Ramzi, meeting him head on, then sidestepped and walked past.

When Ramzi was sure Mohammed had gone, he headed up the stairs to his apartment. As he put keys to the lock, he caught the end of a message being recorded on his answering machine. "I know you're probably tired but I've got to run a

bunch of chairs and plates and flatware over to my mother's. You wouldn't help, would you? I could really use you."

Ramzi dashed into the apartment and grabbed the phone. Life was mysterious, and he, merely a fallen leaf tossed and blown on the wind. "Beryl, my love, of course I will. And why don't we visit awhile?"

Had it really been six months since his meeting with Mohammed? The first class of Kazakh orphans were about to graduate. As they fed the pet rabbits and turtles kept at the school behind the Chabad, he realized he'd grown quite fond of them, and was sad to think they'd soon be leaving for Israel. What a pleasure to teach children so hungry to learn.

He glanced up as Beryl entered the classroom. She leaned against the blackboard beside him and smiled at the children. He wanted to slide his arm around her but knew he couldn't do that in front of the orphans. He stroked his beard. He'd been surprised by how quickly it had grown in. He'd dyed all of his hair silver, making him look at least fifteen years older than he was. This may be America, but he still equated age with wisdom, and was happy to think of himself as growing wise.

"Almost done?" Beryl asked.

He nodded.

"Good. Mom's cooking up a storm. She loves you . . . almost as much as I do."

Ramzi's world had shrunk in the relocation. He felt safe here, and he kept to the neighborhood. He walked each day from Beryl's mother's house, which was now his home, to the Chabad and back, occasionally stopping at the local deli to pick something up for the evening meal. Except perhaps for the *pann*, he didn't miss his old life at all. Beryl was due to

move in with him when school ended in June, and he looked forward to that.

It was Hanukkah and the menorah would be lit tonight. As with many converts, the rituals of Judaism seemed to have more meaning for him than for those who'd practiced from birth. Most of all, he was looking forward to Gloria's (he had begun calling Beryl's mom by her first name) famous *leivivot* and applesauce.

The last few orphans left the room and he took Beryl's hand as they strolled home to Gloria's, the chill air turning Beryl's nose bright red.

THE INVESTIGATION

BY BELINDA FARLEY

Jamaica

So Edwin Stuckey had *not* believed in miracles. Couldn't have. By the third hour of services at the Crusading Home of Deliverance in southeastern Queens—when the bellow of the preacher rang out like a toll that beckoned to repent and reform, and the congregation of twenty-eight had sprung to their feet in a fervor—I, who had so often scoffed at organized religion, was on my feet as well. All about me, the jiggle-jangle of tambourines being slapped on open palms reverberated. Shouted *hallelujahs* stung my eardrums. Tears were shed; wails directed heavenward. Was I praying?

I should've been taking notes.

Instead, I now found myself exercising total recall on the F train. It had been a week since the call had come in on the police scanner: a "1010" announcing a possible death at Guy R. Brewer Boulevard and 108th Avenue. I was a reporter, a novice in the newsroom of a weekly in Richmond Hill, where the Maple Grove Cemetery kept us a safe distance from Jamaica, the neighborhood of this particular call. Jamaica, Queens intimidated the other staff reporters—all four of whom were white—for no other reason than its inhabitants were largely black, and so we tended not to report there. The paper was a rag anyway housed in bright yellow corner boxes and valued mainly for its classifieds. I worked there to prove to my folks that the more