

# FAST FOOD

BY SCOTT KORB

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LIZ BARCLAY

**O**ne late afternoon last June, a few weeks before the start of Ramadan, with an hour remaining before *Asr*, Islam's afternoon prayer, Imam Khalid Latif became suddenly aware of blood on his shirt. Even though he was on the road, he knew he would have to pray soon but was not sure that he could.

Five daily prayers constitute a pillar of Islam, and these prayers are to be done in a state of ritual purity. To this end, Muslims wash before they pray, a preparation known as *wudhu* that includes careful attention to the

hands, mouth, nose, face, arms, hair, ears, and feet. The clothes you wear are supposed to be clean, too. The stain on his shirt was a problem.

The imam had begun the day with a prayer at sunrise. Soon after, accompanied by a friend, he'd left New York City in a van headed for a halal meat-processing facility in western Maryland known as Simply Natural, about 250 miles away. By one o'clock that afternoon, the men had packed the vehicle with three hand-slaughtered steers and were headed back.

"Let's not stop," the imam had said somewhere along the way.



Latif had no change of clothes. Anticipating the logjam on the New Jersey side of the Holland Tunnel, he started calling sheikhs for advice.

After two or three calls, he reached Dawood Yasin, an imam from Berkeley, California, and an avid bow hunter familiar with the mess involved in breaking down animals. After some consideration, Yasin had an answer. Drawing on a tradition of Islamic legal scholarship, he said, “For the butcher, the blood, it’s considered pure.” He then thought more. “Let me ask my wife, just in case.”

The story ends in a sort of anticlimax. Traffic was light enough that Latif and his friend arrived at their destination in time for a change of clothes. They had time not only to prepare themselves for prayer, but to unload the van, too.

Still, after some debate between Sheikh Dawood and his wife, they’d come to an agreement: the prayer would have been permissible, although the sheikh seems to have overstated the case at first. The legal principle in question doesn’t purify impure blood; it excuses the Muslim caught in a situation he simply can’t avoid. By profession, the butcher gets covered in blood. And the imam was now a butcher. Or, close enough—since March he’d owned a meat shop.

In the summer of 2010, I began chronicling the inaugural year of Zaytuna College, the nation’s first four-year Muslim liberal arts school; this is when I first met Sheikh Dawood Yasin. When, in April 2013, two brothers set off bombs near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, I collaborated with Suhaib Webb, imam of New England’s largest mosque, on an op-ed for the *New York Times*, where we argued that the country’s mainstream Islamic institutions are essential to fighting religious extremism. Though not Muslim myself, I’ve come to see Islam as an increasingly significant—and often misunderstood—influence on American civic life.



In this spirit and with this story in mind, I spent a lot of time at Latif’s butcher shop this past Ramadan, Islam’s holy month, when Muslims refrain from all food and drink from sunrise to sunset. Like Dawood Yasin, the scholars at Zaytuna College, and Suhaib Webb, Khalid Latif has, over the years, been a helpful guide into the tradition, specifically my understanding of Ramadan. So has the convert Rollo Romig, a Muslim writer who has become a friend. Writing for the *New Yorker* about his first Ramadan fast in 2012, Romig explained that, unlike other religious fasting, this long month of long days is “intended primarily for focus and elevation, not for penance and atonement. It’s not about mortification of the flesh or otherwise beating yourself up—Ramadan is really about developing new habits: of thought, action, routine. The extremity

of the test is what makes it so vivid.”

Visiting Latif’s shop throughout the month, a question took shape in my mind: What could make the fast more vivid for a Muslim—the month more purifying—than living it in a food store, offering recipes, wrapping up burgers, and hearing customers talk of midday summer barbecues while you go without?

At thirty-two, Khalid Latif is relatively young for an imam, and shorter than he seems, a New Jersey native whose family emigrated from Pakistan in the 1970s. He opened the store, Honest Chops, with three partners. They’ve since hired a few other employees. It’s the first whole-animal halal butcher shop in the country.

After graduating in 2004 from New York University, where I teach and where the imam and I initially met, Latif studied at Hartford Seminary’s



Islamic Chaplaincy Program—also the first of its kind in the nation. His main work as a religious leader has been with the New York Police Department—in 2007, he was named the city’s Muslim chaplain—and as the imam overseeing NYU’s Islamic Center, an appointment he’s held since 2005.

His business partners at Honest Chops are members of his congregation, which is open to Muslims with or without an affiliation with NYU. Twenty-five percent of the store’s profits will go back into the Islamic Center. Being a Muslim leader in this country now often involves the cultivation of Islamic institutions committed to social services, education, devotion, activism, or the arts. Honest Chops was founded, in part, to help fund

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**ABOVE:** Imam Khalid Latif; his butcher shop, Honest Chops.

job-training programs, a domestic violence shelter, and an Islamic school in Manhattan. These projects are likewise financially supported by a Muslim wedding service and some Edible Arrangements franchises.

The thought to open a whole-animal butcher shop in the East Village came to Latif and his wife during Ramadan 2013. They had encountered problems getting halal food they considered wholesome. One variation of the story—a version of which Latif wrote as part of his annual Ramadan reflections for the *Huffington Post*—has his wife “bewildered” at halal meat counters, where butchers try to sell her cuts she hasn’t ordered, or aren’t familiar with the cuts she wants, or “cut the meat, pick up the phone, use the cash register, and blow their nose simultaneously, all without gloves on.”

Latif told me about his own experience that same summer in a meat shop on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, a stretch of which is packed with Islamic and Middle Eastern markets. Latif was there with Anas Hasan, now thirty, a partner in the shop who at the time was working as a baggage handler for United Airlines and seeking some direction in his life. The pair was basically being ignored. “The butcher is picking up huge slabs of meat,” Latif told me, “and there’s a pile of meat in the corner, about ten, fifteen feet away from him, and how it’s getting there is, he’s picking pieces up from the box and throwing them against the wall. And they’re ricocheting against the wall into that pile. And it’s just building up. Every few minutes he’s scratching his beard, rubbing his nose.” This meat is halal, but the imam can’t bring himself to bring it home.

Now, on the one hand, what offended Latif could be seen as a basic lack of hygiene. Offensive to most anyone. But from an Islamic perspective, the problem with the Atlantic Avenue butchery—and “the stories could go on and on,” Latif says—is that it lacks “real excellence,” or *ihsan*, a word derived from a root in Arabic that denotes beauty, perfection, and spiritual fulfillment.

Ihsan is meant to be a constant pursuit for believers. To help out, Allah gives the believer a month each year, Ramadan, to focus; daily fasting is a physical reminder of one’s spiritual commitments. Breaking fast with an evening meal, or *iftar*, relieves the hunger and the thirst, but only temporarily, because it also prepares the believer for the following day’s hunger and thirst. And breaking fast within a community, which is often how it’s done—at iftars prepared and served by volunteers, with food paid for through donations—tells the Muslim he is not alone in his daily pursuit.

And yet, Latif’s encounter on Atlantic Avenue suggests something else entirely. There’s no in-it-togetherness when the halal butcher shows neither you nor the animals he sells any of the sympathy Islam calls him to. And it’s a real shame. Not doing one’s best during Ramadan is to miss the opportunity Allah has provided for believers to focus on elevating—even perfecting—their lives. For Latif, opening a butcher shop is about taking what halal can mean—meat thrown across the room, swarming flies, a stench, careless cuts—and trying to elevate it. Make it better, more wholesome, more pure. Can what Allah has deemed permissible be made more perfect? As a time set apart from the rest of the year, Ramadan presents this possibility as a challenge and confronts the believer with the potential for a human to become more perfect—better than he is.

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**RIGHT:** David Hurtado cuts meat; Anas Hasan is the face of Honest Chops.

For practicing Muslims, the Koran provides the basic principles governing the lawfulness of all things in the world and of all human activity. That’s a lot. The book’s second chapter, *Surat al-Baqarah* (“The Cow”), includes this line: “It is He who created for you all of that which is on the earth.” “He” is God, or Allah. *Surat al-Jathiyah*, the book’s forty-fifth chapter, contains this: “And He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth—all are from Him.” These lines are often interpreted as revealing the mercy of Allah, whose gifts to humanity—“all of that which is on the earth”—are understood to be endless. When Muslims invoke the name of God with the refrain *Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Raheem*, a phrase that opens all but one of the chapters of the Koran, they’re saying, “In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.”

For Muslims, just as the Koran presents God’s generosity and mercy in establishing what humanity may do and what on earth we’re allowed to use or eat, so too does the book set limits on what God considers lawful. All things are permissible, or halal, unless they’ve been identified by God as forbidden, or *haram*. He says no pork. No carrion. No booze. No blood that gushes forth from an animal. Adherence to these distinctions shapes the moral life. And in the moral universe of the slaughterhouse, where an overwhelming majority of halal animals in this country become haram when they’re shot with a captive bolt pistol, a blessing and a sharp knife make all the difference to the Muslim. For Latif, a little more mercy would make a greater difference still.

A convert named Abdush Shakur slaughters goats and lambs and chickens and steers for Simply Natural in a low, white concrete building where he and I met in late July. I asked how his Ramadan was going. “*Alhamdulillah*,” he said. All praise is due to Allah. “I can’t complain.”

Proper slaughter makes the animals he kills halal. When they’re calm, they’re said to have submitted to Allah. The attention this slaughterhouse pays to animal welfare helps ensure that the meat is wholesome, or *tayyib*. The day I visited, I found three young steers Shakur had slaughtered, all split right down the middle and aging in the freezer. Two animals of about the same size—close to 650 pounds each—white fat over their flesh, had been raised and finished on grass; between them hung a huge grain-finished steer whose fat had turned golden. Latif had been assured that on the farms—both in Maryland and in western Pennsylvania’s Amish country—all of Simply Natural’s animals are given room to roam and grass to eat (even if they’re finished on grain). Taken together with their eventual halal slaughter, these qualities are what bring Latif all the way to Sharpsburg, Maryland, for his beef. Honest Chops’s goal is to bring the halal butcher shop up to the same standard as your modern-day artisanal meat counter.

Shakur, whose daily task is known as *dhabihah*, is forty-six and lives in Hagerstown, Maryland. He is stout, black, with close-cropped hair and a white-fringed beard. He has the word KHARI tattooed on his right hand, presumably from a time before he became a Muslim; according to the *hadith*—the tradition of words and acts of the Prophet—tattoos are haram. Shakur took the *shahadah* (declared himself a Muslim) during Ramadan 1995. He’d been reading literature sent by an incarcerated brother. Still, he told me, “When I accepted Islam, I didn’t understand Islam. It took me years and years and years and years to get it. I was a Muslim, but I wasn’t acting in accordance with Islam all the time until maybe ten years ago, when I devoted my life to Islam.”

This was about the time he left his work as a carpenter and electrician and started killing animals



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whole animal butcher  
*all-natural — locally sourced*



in the name of God. Moving from Washington, D.C., in 2004, he found work through his brother-in-law in a halal slaughterhouse elsewhere in Washington County. He found in his colleagues a model of how to live. “I see the way these people move, the way they act, and as I read the Koran and the *sunnah*,” Shakur explained, using the Arabic term for the normative way of life for the Muslim, as transmitted by the hadith, “I started seeing that it coincided with what they were doing.” Those slaughterers revealed to him what it looked like to be a Muslim. “It was by the grace of Allah that Allah allowed me to go there,” he told me. He also said it was an accident.

These days, now at Simply Natural, a smaller operation, when there are animals in the barn out back, he shares the slaughter floor with a USDA inspector named Alan. This is solitary and tiring work, particularly during the Ramadan fast. One at a time, animals move from the barn through an alley into a “squeeze chute,” their shoulders forcing a gate around their necks as they step forward. When the steer is in this position, and it’s calm, Shakur will recite the words “*Bismillah Allahu Akbar*”—in the name of Allah, God is great—and then he’ll kill it with one pass of a sharp blade through the jugulars, the windpipe, and the esophagus. It’s preferable if the knife remains hidden from view until the slaughter. “One thing about Muslims,” he explained, “is that we try to remember Allah all the time. Doing this type of work—halal killing—it makes you remember Allah because you glorify all day. Even with the kills—you’re glorifying Allah all day.”

**H**onest Chops is set below street level on Ninth Street in New York’s East Village. Since opening this past spring, Anas Hasan has become the de facto face of the store. It’s given him direction and focus—this Ramadan he was

studying Ryan Farr’s *Whole Beast Butchery*—yet he’s maintained his part-time work at the airport for the perk of free travel.

Behind the counter, Hasan is cheery, a glad-hander without the smarm. People recognize him on the street, and he recognizes them. There is a mosque a few blocks away, but most of his customers, he says, are not Muslim. A shingle hangs out front of the store reading HALAL BUTCHER, but Hasan explains that for most passersby a different sign above the lintel and a sandwich board on the sidewalk make the more impressive argument for shopping here: ALL-NATURAL CHICKEN, GRASS-FED BEEF, LOCALLY SOURCED. The shop is making no obvious effort to convert non-Muslims to Islam. But the door is open in other ways and for other reasons just as central to the faith.

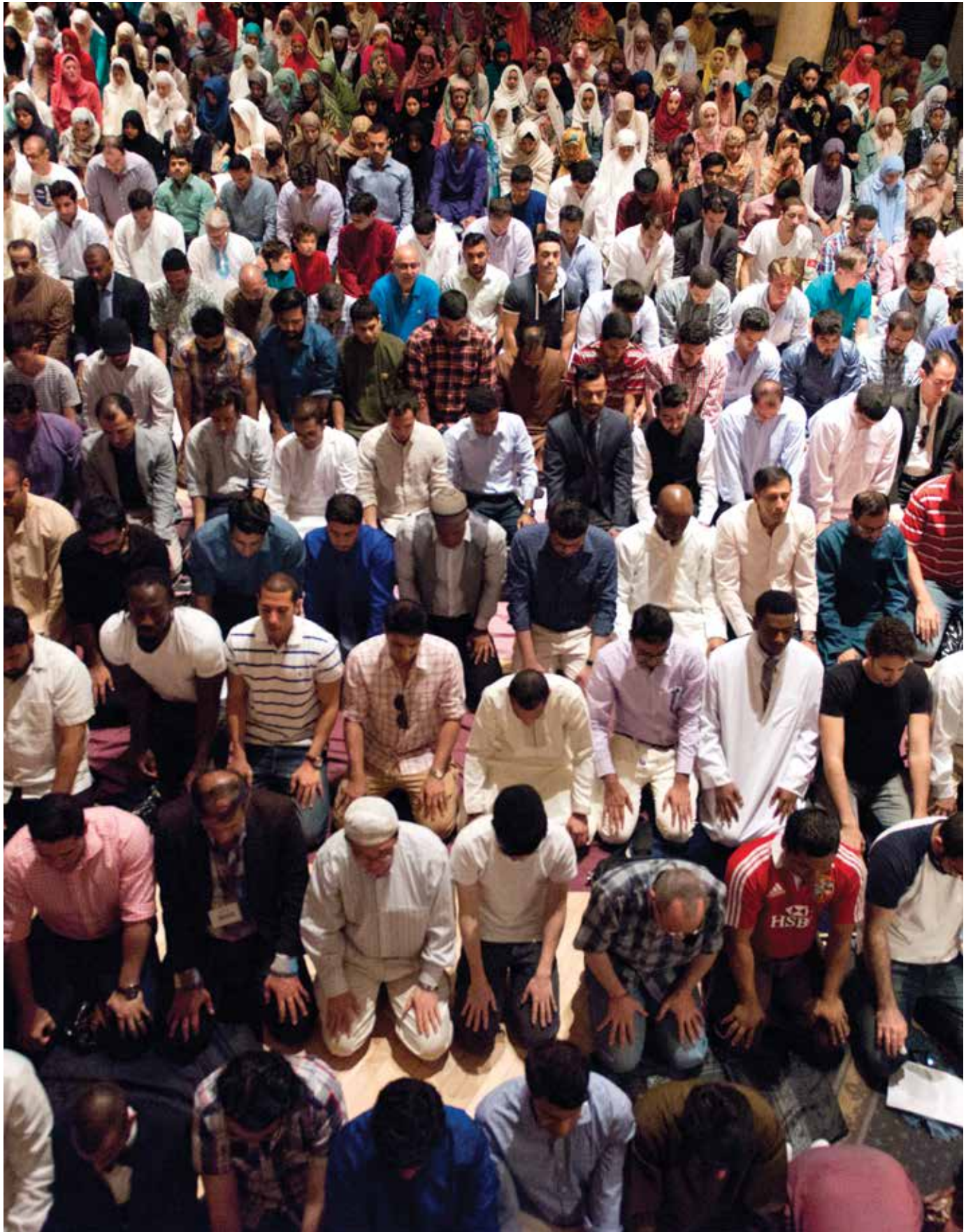
Customers on Atlantic Avenue buy meat from the halal shop Latif described because they have to; those shoppers are Muslims in search of food that is permissible to eat. The shop owner can get away with throwing meat across a room only if he doesn’t really want outsiders to come in. For Honest Chops, the impulse is clearly different. The inspiration may still come from Brooklyn, but it’s the Brooklyn of whole-animal butchery and farm-to-table cuisine. In this way, it’s American Islam without other apparent kinds of ethnic attachments. Of course, a broad appeal in an increasingly prosperous neighborhood is better for business, and building a strong business benefits the partners while also feeding the Islamic community and institution they all belong to. But it also reflects a much more expansive sense of Islamic mercy than we find in the shared sympathy of the Ramadan fast, the fellowship of an iftar, or even the establishment of a school for Muslim children. Inviting others in and serving them what they want—in this case, well-raised organic meats,

cut to order—fulfills what Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, a well-regarded scholar from Chicago, has called the “cultural imperative” within Islam. Looking back through history and across the world, Dr. Umar says that, “In China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked African.” In the East Village in 2014, Islam should look like the East Village. And as dealers in meat, the proprietors of Honest Chops must reflect a culture whose growing disgust at industrial farming has reshaped the moral universe of the farm, the slaughterhouse, the butcher shop, and the kitchen.

Over the centuries, Dr. Umar argues in a widely read 2004 essay, the advantages for Muslims of following this cultural imperative have been profound. “The religion,” he writes, “became not only functional and familiar at the local level but dynamically engaging, fostering stable indigenous Muslim identities and allowing Muslims to put down deep roots and make lasting contributions wherever they went.” Honest Chops is already talking about franchises and the possibility of running their own abattoir; they seem to believe in both broad engagement and carving out a place for oneself. To take root, their Islam recommends both things in equal measure.

**R**amadan ends with Eid al-Fitr, the Feast of Breaking the Fast, which Latif and his congregation celebrated on Monday, July 28. In the spirit of engaging with the community at large, and because their own space for worship had grown too small to suit their needs, they arranged for morning prayers and a brunch to take place in Judson Memorial Church, a Christian congregation with its own long history of public engagement, including opening its doors to Occupy Wall Street protestors evicted from Zuccotti Park following a police raid in November 2011.

When I arrived outside Judson the





fast. The month had been an opportunity for them to practice doing their best. But Ramadan was now over. And before he let them go—back into their pre-Ramadan lives and routines, their old thoughts and actions—Latif wanted to remind them of what they'd all just been through, and why.

“Carry forth with you what you have taken from Ramadan as a starting point,” he said. “And let consciousness and mindfulness be the criteria by which you move forward.” Doing so, he said, means making one’s particular life more perfect, continuing in the spirit of Ramadan even after it’s gone, and then showing up for those around—Muslim or not—so that their lives may be improved. “We will not benefit from the blessing that is uniquely you if you are not here for us to be able to take benefit from it.”

The community, he said, was moving in different directions. Continuing to build. “But there is still a lot of work to be done,” he added. “And we want to build something that reaches its pinnacle and its best, and when that’s done we want to keep building and keep growing.” Here was the relentless striving toward *ihsan*. There is a free clinic in the works, and the shelter for women who face violence at home. Honest Chops was part of the growth and had also paid into the kitty.

Latif’s prayers went on. He called to Allah. The congregation’s *ameens* tumbled after in call-and-response. And Latif remembered: “There are people in this world, they will not have food to eat in celebration of this day of Eid.” All of us would. “*Ya Allah*,” he said, “grant them and their loved ones and all of us the best of meals in the world beyond this one.”

*Ameen.*

The imam looked over the congregation. “Make this a blessed day for all of you; feel free to hug each other. We have brunch after.” **LP**

morning of Eid, the line of those waiting to be admitted extended along Washington Square South and around the corner, far down Thompson Street. A little after nine, when the doors opened and the crowds began streaming in, each worshipper was handed a plastic deli bag for his shoes. Attendees had been asked to bring their own prayer rugs, and as they entered they formed rows of men toward the front, women in the back. The 2,000-square-foot sanctuary, plus the balcony, began filling up quickly. In most mosques I’ve been to there’s at least a narrow walkway separating the men and women. This was not the case at Judson.

For Eid, Honest Chops had supplied the caterer with meat for chicken tikka, which would be arranged in warming pans alongside rice, chickpeas and beans, flatbread, fruit, and the sweet semolina dessert, halva. Sweets, in particular, are a traditional part of the Eid celebration—a unique day for Muslims when fasting is not allowed. Someone had donated boxes of Dunkin’ Donuts. There was a massive container of organic dates.

Filling the church took most of an hour. Latif, who would lead the celebration, worried aloud about the crush of families. Dressed in a

flowing golden robe and head covering, he positioned himself at the head of the congregation at a spot near the back of the sanctuary, so that the worshippers would be facing Mecca.

“Sisters,” he said, “I don’t mean this in an offensive way, but can you move backwards?” There was some movement. “Pray really, really close to each other,” he encouraged. “If you need to make *sajdah*—prostrations—“on someone’s back, it’s permissible,” he said.

All the while, the sound of the *Eid Takbirs*, a sung pronunciation of God’s greatness—“*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*”—murmured through the hall.

Eventually everyone would make it in, piling into the sanctuary, the balcony, three staircases, a foyer, and a lower-level hall. The crowd, including many small children, reached nearly two thousand people. Latif’s prayers and his sermon were broadcast over a cell phone into the basement; a member of the congregation would relay the start of each new prayer cycle into the stairwells in a game of long-distance Telephone.

For a month, these men and women had lived in the shared sympathy and the vivid fellowship of the