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### The Magic Moslem

LARRY SMITH

He pegged Dora Roberts for a lower middle class black woman adequately educated and presentable, if a bit aggressive, as long as she was on her meds. They were all like that at the aftercare facility, essentially the same as you or I when they were drugged; creatures of an impenetrable plain when they were not. She wore a red skirt and nylon stockings, and her face was a little heavy with mascara. Thick darkish-red lipstick. He imagined her growing up in a track house in Tewksbury or Saugus, her father a blue collar worker periodically unemployed. She was fleshy, especially her cheeks. Sexually, she made no impression on him.

“The other patients seem to like you a lot,” she said when they first had a chance to chat in the lounge area of the facility.

“I hope so,” he smiled. “We don’t actually think of them as patients.”

“What do you think of them as?”

“Members of this community.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” she asked, no tone of challenge but a kind of nervousness in the question.

“Dr. Litowitz, Dave Baldwin, the rest of the staff.”

"Ok," she said and was about to say something more when a look he hadn't seen on any of the other members, like a vision, not nearly the same thing as incipient hallucination, preempted her. She was still with us, here on earth, not dissociated but distracted by something she was perhaps not seeing but rivetedly imagining.

Then she seemed to clear her mind. "Are you from Boston?" she asked.

"No, Cleveland originally, then New York, now here. I may stay here."

"So you like Boston?" she offered.

"Yes. It has a lot of texture. Where are you from?"

"Rhodesia, what is now called..."

"Zimbabwe?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

He didn't see her for another week, when she turned up wearing what she told him was called a jilbāb. It hung loosely over her full body. Her hands and face were uncovered. It was a multicolored garb, the reds and blues fairly muted, with faintly etched floral patterns. It looked like North Africa and he complimented her on it.

"It is hijab, which means proper clothing when men and women are together outside the family."

"Oh, Moslem tradition interests you?"

"I am a Moslem," she said.

"You became a Moslem?"

"I was born a Moslem."

“Oh,” he said, non-committal, as deferential to her narrative as he would have been to any of the others’. “May I ask where you got this jilbāb? They sell them here?”

“My father bought it for me last year just before he died, when he was in Fez. He was passing through the city.”

“He traveled a great deal?”

“He was in exile,” she said.

It was a powerful term and she said it gracefully. Dora plainly told him that her father was Ian Smith’s most powerful black advisor. That Smith was well-disposed toward Islam for the social control he then thought it provided. Other blacks resented her father. They thought him a conspirator, an adventurer, a traitor to them. He bought a mansion in Rhodesia on a high hill overlooking many meadows, and there mother and father raised her to love God and respect authority. As she affably disclosed more, he could hear no trace of Boston in her accent. She sounded rather like one of the black women he’d known and worked with in Cleveland.

Through successive visits, she’d volunteer several of her thoughts on Islam. He never questioned her about her accent, about her name which seemed so prosaically American; he never asked her to say something in Arabic. He was fond of her, or at least respectful enough not to back her into a corner. Dora talked about her family’s pilgrimage to Mecca when she was a little girl; how the intent throngs vibrated the air with their collective piety, the humming sense of mission that brought so many nationalities together in such contained fervor. “Why did you choose America of all the places your family might have gone?” he asked, as if he actually believed any part of her biographical rendition. “And why Boston?”

“Oh, we didn’t come for good to this country until last year, after my father died. “We had visited many times, but only visited. When my father died, my uncle sent for us. He’d been living in Detroit for many years. He’s a well-respected Imam. But when we passed through Boston, my mother met Governor Sargent’s wife, and she was very gracious, and urged us to consider living here.”

That struck him as a perilous fantasy, since the Governor’s wife was a patron of the aftercare facility and periodically visited. “What did you do here when you arrived?”

“Actually, I didn’t stay here long at first because I got a job teaching Arabic language and literature in a private school in Rhode Island,” she said. Then her eyes glazed over, the same visionary interlude that transpired when first they met. He waited in cautious silence until she returned, clear-eyed, and then he ventured, “For Westerners like me, Arabic seems to be an impossibly difficult language to learn.”

“It is a language that puts people in a different world from those who don’t know it,” she said. “There is a secrecy about the language that I can’t explain to you. There is an intimacy about it. It is very difficult to translate. You will never understand the great beauty of the Koran. I’m not satisfied with the translations I’ve done. The short Suras are especially difficult. I felt like I was trying to translate the light of one world from that world to another. I’m not sure I succeeded.” Then she paused and, apropos of nothing, said matter-of-factly, “Mugabe raped my mother.”

He started to respond but did not. “I wish I knew Persian as well as I know Arabic,” she said. “I love Hafiz. I would love to translate him.”

"Language is so..." he stuttered. "Do you know the American poet Wallace Stevens? He uses the phrase 'ithy ploonts.' His rhythms, his constructions; sometimes he reminds me of Dr. Seuss."

"Ithy ploonts," she repeated, respectfully. "We felt very strangely when Ian Smith visited Mugabe and Smith said he was treated most courteously. Mugabe told him that our country was a wonderful country. Ian Smith once called Mugabe an apostle of Satan but now he was calling him sober and responsible. Ian Smith told his wife Janet that he hoped it was not a hallucination."

Now her only home, and her mother's only home, was Mecca, and it was mere symbol. "I am a Jew," he said, "and I understand how the Semitic peoples have wandered and wandered. I hope that proves to be a bond between us all."

"Yes, I hope the bond is not a hallucination," said Dora. "Jews are wonderful people."

Once during a group discussion with other members, Dora seemed vague, detached; it was not quite the visionary reverie he knew, but she was away somewhere else just the same. When he asked her afterward if she were tired (an innocent-seeming question, but a way, perhaps, for him to begin to know more about those realms to which she'd suddenly travel), she told him she was remembering their days in Mombasa. The cowrie shells were everywhere there, adorning the clothes of both sexes, hung around voodoo-like statuaries sold for a few coins on the city corners, and many were transported elsewhere by merchants visiting, say, Turkhana, a dry land in central Kenya which was also mainly Moslem.

She'd look out from their dark suites across the mysterious waters, knowing that soon the family would be

leaving their womb-like refuge on the teeming city block to sail she knew not where because she was still too young to know. "Mombasa," he murmured to himself, wondering if it was the exotic name "Mombasa" that had captured her fancy, and to what extent her visions of the city had been based on photos, maybe old photos stretching back to early colonial days.

Weeks went by without her. He was distracted by the others. When she returned, she seemed disheveled. Sleeves on her mauve blouse were frayed. She wore an American-styled skirt, which was a little crooked and awkward around her hips. "Have you been all right?" he asked.

"I have *been*," she answered. She said to him, I ask myself why you people like Maria Callas so much and then I realize it was because she had such a big nose. It was a stiff protuberance right in the middle of her face, and when you people looked at her she looked back and ravished you with it. He was impressed she knew who Maria Callas was. But then again she also knew who Ian Smith and Hafiz were.

"I missed you," was all he said, and she said, "I missed you too, and I came back mainly to see you, because I have something I want to give you."

It was a leather pendant, a narrow quadrangular form pointed at all four tips, reminiscent in shape of the Star of Bethlehem as usually illustrated on Christmas cards. It was brown and black-fringed on its front; it looked sub-Saharan. On its plain back was an Arabic-looking scribble, which was not inelegant, and which he admired for the effort and skill she must have needed to make it look so plausible...

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He thanked her profusely. Then he went back to New York and many difficult years went by. He saved the pendant as he had saved mementos of the other members, mostly little fond notes they'd written him or snapshots or signed copies of the mimeographed poems and stories the counselors at the aftercare facility encouraged them to write. Naseer came over for dinner, and he reminisced about them. He always enjoyed talking to Naseer. Naseer was a Palestinian who worked as a translator for both governments and companies. He'd just returned from Albany. "Oh, that Empire State Plaza!" said Naseer. "My friend, all it lacks is two-thousand years to become a ruin just like the Acropolis and then it will have the same prestige. Don't you think the Acropolis was equally monstrous in its heyday? Ruination is the great dignifier and the blessings of time are blessings indeed."

"You should have seen some of these people," he said when the conversation moved on to the aftercare facility. "There was this one guy who when he didn't take his meds would rail against this godless world of ours that—can you believe it?—names missiles and space missions after pagan gods! I used to play chess with this other guy who'd squirm and twist in his chair and then announce, 'You will be checkmated in four moves.' And he was always as good as his word."

"Chess," said Naseer, "that's another level. I'm surprised there are chess masters who *aren't* floridly psychotic."

"Some of these mental patients were very bright. One woman had this whole narrative about herself, how her father was Ian Smith's chief black advisor, and how she had done translations of the Koran that didn't quite satisfy her."

"I'll bet," smiled Naseer. "What do you think was the etiology of all that?"

"Oh you could speculate all kinds of things involving race, politics, and religion. But at the end of the day, who knows!"

He showed Naseer a few of his mementos and identified the pendant as Dora's gift. Naseer turned it over. His manner suddenly changed. The irreverence drained out of him. "Where did she get it?" Naseer asked.

"I don't know."

"Did she write this?" he asked, referencing the scribble.

"I guess so. Why?"

"Well, it's very strange. It is Arabic."

"You're kidding. What does it say?"

Naseer averted his eyes. He was embarrassed. "It says, 'Oh Merciful One, mount me.' Did she write this?"

He didn't reply for a moment, wondering who else might have written it.

