I Am

by Tim Elhajj

Until I was well into my thirties, I didn't realize this simple fact: Elhajj means pilgrim in Arabic. I blame Dad. He rarely said anything about our name; never talked about his father, or what it means to be an Arab.

In Islam, a pilgrimage is the sacred duty of every Muslim. If you make the trip, you earn the title, Elhajj. When Malcolm X did it, he took the name, El Hajj Malik Shabazz.

When I was a boy, I always wondered if Dad were black. No one in our small town looked like Dad. He had the thick features of an Arab. If he let his hair grow, it piled up in messy loafs on his head. Of course, I never asked Dad about any of this. I wasn't sure how to present it. Or maybe I didn't want to risk an answer.

A pilgrimage is a search.

I have little experience with Islam or Black Power, but I know about searching. Having lived all over the States, I have never met another Elhajj. In the NYC phone book, I was the only Elhajj in all five boroughs.

Recently my mother-in-law married a man named Lodge. Soon after the marriage, she began using her maiden name (Lackland) as a middle initial. During a visit to her house, I noticed mail on the kitchen counter and realized her game: Mom was trying to steal the phonetic pronunciation of my name (L. Lodge).

She denies it, but I am no fool.

Some pilgrimages are hardly worth the effort. Various crusades come to mind: some long ago, others just recent. After September 11, 2001, I called my sixteen-year-old son in Pennsylvania. He shares my name but has lived with his mother his entire life, in the same small town where I grew up.

"Your last name," I said to my son. "You know it's Arabic." With the crisis at hand, I had some vague notion of protecting him.

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"Why are you telling me this?" he asked. I heard concern, if not outright fear in his voice. I felt bad. I did for him, I realized, about the same as Dad did for me.

If you want to search successfully these days, use Google. Elhajjs are scarce in American cities but plentiful on Facebook, where they number close to 200. Only 14 appear on MySpace. Clearly Elhajjs prefer Facebook to MySpace for their social networking needs.

Dad's idea was to keep his head down, to be more American than his immigrant father. A fine example of a pilgrimage hardly worth your time to perform. If Dad were alive, I might warn him: Be who you are!

And he might respond: I am!

When I was five or six, I asked Dad why Cassius Clay took the name Muhammad Ali. Dad said, "Just another big mouth." As it turns out, Ali was on a pilgrimage all his own. Like the rest of America, Dad eventually came round, if not during the Rumble in the Jungle, then shortly thereafter. Certainly by the Thrilla in Manila.

If Dad had to work to understand the bluster of a talented boxer, he understood other issues more easily. Perhaps because his own dark skin barred him from opportunity, Dad invited a white minister and his black wife over to supper one night. It wasn't clear to me that they were a couple. After a fine meal, I stood in the door with Dad for goodnights.

I held onto my father's leg as the guests stood on the porch. The night was cool and the woman sidled up to her husband; he slipped his arm around her waist, and then smiled into her face.

I felt concern; perhaps even shock, if not outright fear (just as my son would, some thirty years later).

Looking up to my father, I asked if the two were together. When he nodded his head, I shamed my entire family by saying, "BUT SHE'S BLACK!"

Everyone stared.

"Oh, Timmy," Dad said.

My face grew hot.

When I looked up to Dad, his hand covered his thick brow. The woman recovered first. Raising both her arms, she looked at the soft skin on the underside of her forearms as if it were the first time she had noticed the color.

With a mild tone of shock, she said, "I am."

Then she looked at her husband and laughed. The minister laughed with her. Just a pair of pilgrims, having a good time.