

Dying to Make a Living

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MIKE ARAMIN



RAY HINDI

READER[®]

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 1998 ▶ VOLUME 27, NUMBER 18 ▶ CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

Another liquor
store murder, and
a Palestinian family
finds that success
in America can
come at a terribly
high price.

The women sit cross-legged in the back corner of the Muslim Community Center mosque, near Elston and Kostner, their heads bowed under hijab scarves. "Like they say here in America, there is no free lunch!" says the disembodied voice of the imam, who is hidden from them by a curtain.

Beneath the hem of the curtain, men's feet shuffle back and forth. A little boy in a starched shirt and bow tie, too young to pray with his father out front, pelted an old woman's brown, wrinkled toes with a plastic egg and giggles.

The imam reminds the worshippers that January marks the advent of Ramadan, the ninth and holiest month of the Islamic year, observed by fasting from sunset to sundown. His voice bounces off the mosque's high ceiling. "This is a time of cleansing the body and soul in homage to Allah, the most beneficent, the most merciful," he preaches, "a time of charity and of sacrifice.

"Ninety percent of the world's refugees are Muslim. Allah has chosen you to continue, here in North America, the most glorious civilization

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of peoples."

In a cloud of swirling fabric, the rows of women rise, then sink to their knees and arch forward, their lips brushing the floor.

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Ghassan Odtallah, a 30-year-old Palestinian, immigrated to the States from Ram Allah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, 15 years ago. He's worked in liquor stores ever since, and three years ago bought into SuperSave Liquors near North and Oak Park avenues. Today he looks tired but still greets his customers with a "How ya doin', buddy?"

"Back home we heard a lot of things about America," Odtallah says. "You know, all the classy stuff, no poor people, no garbage, no homeless. But do you know what the heart of Chicago is?" he asks, ringing up a man's eighth of vodka. "Its projects."

The customer grunts appreciatively, clenching his soggy cigar in his teeth and tucking the vodka into his coat.

"There is no American dream," says Odtallah, watching the man duck back into the rain outside. "Only God's judgment, recording your debts like a credit card report."

The phone rings; it's Odtallah's uncle-in-law. Odtallah rubs his temples and mumbles directions to the airport in broken Arabic. The uncle is picking up Odtallah's sister, Montaha, 18, and his parents, who have just

"We came here to leave all the problems back home in the Middle East only to find small wars raging all over this country."

GHASSAN ODTALLAH



the store 15 minutes before closing on Sunday, October 26. According to the cousin, Mike Aramin, translating for his father, who was visiting the store that night, the taller man announced a "stick-up," burst through the swinging door at the counter, and pushed Hindi against the wall. He shoved a .45 in his face and demanded the contents of the cash register. Hindi gave him all the money, about \$6,000, just like Aramin had told him to do if this ever happened.

The man repaid Hindi's compliance by shooting him twice.

First, on the underside of his wrist, and then, pressing the gun against Hindi's chest, downward through the heart. Police reported that Hindi may have taken too long to get down on the floor when the robbers commanded him to. The two masked men fled through the alley next to the store, dropping almost \$700 on the floor in their haste.

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returned from two months in the West Bank village of Saur, near Hebron. There they buried Montaha's new husband, Ray Hindi, in the ground next to his parents' house. "Back home we own our own graves," Odtallah says.

Hindi was killed while working in his cousin's liquor store, TJ's Pantry Plus, on Fullerton near Kedzie. He was a month shy of 22 years old.

Two men in white ski masks stormed into

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After the first gunshot, Aramin's father, who'd been standing on the other side of the counter, bolted to the back of the store and locked himself in the office, where he called Aramin at home in Jefferson Park. Afterward he returned to the storefront to chase away a pack of teenage boys who were plucking stray bills off the blood-spattered linoleum.

Aramin called 911 and sped through red lights to get to Hindi. At the store he met police and an ambulance, which rushed Hindi to Illinois Masonic. But Hindi was pronounced dead a few hours later.

Between January 14 and January 17, Javier Claudio, 20, Rafael Ortiz Jr., 19, and Felipe Agron, 23, were arrested and charged with armed robbery and first-degree murder. According to state's attorney's office spokesperson Marcy O'Boyle, allegedly Claudio shot Hindi while Ortiz watched and Agron waited in the getaway car. At press time all three were slated to appear at a preliminary hearing on Friday, February 6.

"You know, when you take a life you don't just kill," Odtallah says. "You clean that person from this world, and those who are left, what are they to do?"

Hindi was Montaba's first love. Odtallah says that since his death, she is "not there anymore." He returns home from work to

find her huddled beneath a blanket on the couch in the blue glow of the TV. His family wants to send her back home for good, back to where family is sacred and women don't run around half-naked and people

U.S. when he turned 18, and Jaradat followed shortly thereafter. Both worked part-time at TJ's Pantry Plus. They took nights off together to clown around with a video camera at Arab parties downtown. "He is

tall with big muscles. When he was 15 he had to fight seven guys to get his black belt. I always told him if I had his body I'd show it off. But he didn't show off, so I couldn't be jealous." He spoke near perfect English,

"Ray was the smartest and toughest guy in our school back home."

TOM JARADAT



don't poison themselves with drugs and liquor.

the reason I came to this country," Jaradat says.

"Ray was the smartest and toughest guy in our school back home. He had hair down to his shoulders—this is not common in my country, but all the girls loved it. And he was

Jaradat says, had only the slightest trace of an accent. "Every night he would read the newspapers for words he didn't know and then look those words up in the dictionary. He wanted to learn everything.

"I couldn't believe when I heard. I mean,

he never got into fights. Everyone liked him; even the gangbangers shook his hand. I have a short temper, but not Ray."

They both went to Wright College. Hindi was taking courses in computer science and Jaradat studied business management in addition to taking flying lessons to get his pilot's license.

"Ray was straight," says Jaradat. "He told me we had to plan our responsibilities. When he fell in love with Montaha, we talked about me marrying her cousin.

"I am engaged now to a girl. Sometimes she cries and says 'I want you to leave this job—you can't forget what happened to your friend!' And I tell her that we're working hard at this store, that I need to pay for school, my flying lessons."

But lately, Jaradat admits, he thinks not only about quitting but about going back to Sair because America is too dangerous.

There are 1,550 Arab-owned businesses in Chicago, says Sam Zanayed, director of the Advisory Council on Arab Affairs of the city Commission on Human Relations, and about a third of them are liquor stores. Hindi is one of five Arabs he's heard of who were killed in liquor-store robberies in Chicago in 1997.

Zanayed estimates that 80 percent of Chicago's Arabs are Muslim. Selling liquor is expressly forbidden by the Koran, and yet, says Okab Hassan, secretary general of the Arab Educational Council in Chicago, "some want to make fast money, so they sell liquor to those addicts killing themselves, who then return to kill. Both become victims of soci-

Here, a stranger can walk in and take my life for change—just like Ray."

After the ambulance took Hindi away, Aramin mopped up the thick pool of blood that had spilled from his chest and wrist. He had never seen so much blood. He says he still sees his cousin almost nightly in his dreams. During the day, he says, "I go in the back and I cry. I never cry. I don't believe in crying and yet all I do is cry."

Since October there have been several changes at TJ's. There's a bulletproof glass window with a drop-drawer system to protect clerks after-hours. The counter's swinging door has been fortified with an extra panel of wood. An armed security guard stalks the aisles from 6 PM to closing. And there's a banner, scrawled with heartfelt good-byes, declaring RAY HINDI—WE WILL REMEMBER YOU!

Aramin knows many of his customers by name. He flirts with the Puerto Rican pre-Madonna who says she wants an Arab husband, teases the young Chicanas in designer sweat suits, and banters with Polish and Arab men buying six-packs as they wait for their wives to finish doing laundry next door. But his red-rimmed eyes dart to the door as it beeps with each new entry.

Until the robbers were caught, Aramin had decided to sell his 50 percent share of TJ's. Now he's not so sure, but he's still considering it. He says that for all the steady business, he makes little profit. "My mother says it's because it is sin money," he says. His parents returned to their homeland on January 17, but his father will fly back for the

murder trial.

"My mother was waking up early every day to say good-bye to me. She fears for me, prays all the time," Aramin says, shaking his head. "I used to love it here, talking to the neighborhood people every day. I felt secure. But now... now I want to work somewhere like a gas station, you know, where I can be completely enclosed in bulletproof glass."

Chicago law forbids a liquor-store owner to protect his shop with anything but a rifle—a slow, heavy cowboy gun and not the best match for the semiautomatics carried by most would-be robbers, Aramin scoffs. By the time you can cock the damn thing you're dead.

His gaze falls on the Budweiser sign of a nearby Latino-owned liquor store. Last year a 13-year-old kid blew a hole through its back wall. He curls his lip in disgust. "You know, insurance covers armed robbery, but what insures my life?"

Aramin says Ramadan is a time when Muslims "are honest in all things," when they learn patience and self-control. He washes his hands, dries them, and picks up the hard-bound Koran.

"As Muslims," Aramin says softly, "we believe there is a heaven and hell. If you are good and pray and fast for Allah, you will reach heaven. If you are bad, if you steal and kill—you will find hell. So you see, I know where Ray is."

He opens the book to study, but more customers come through the door, and so he returns to the counter and the rhythmic ring of the cash register. ■