America’s Worst Brown

“Brown bleeds through the straight line, unstauchable—the line separating black from white, for example. Brown confuses. Brown forms at the border of contradiction.”—Richard Rodriguez, Brown.

Throughout history, America always feared brown, but it was a particular kind of brown, barely acknowledged before September 11, that America feared even more: Arabs.

Many Arabs, like many Americans, came to this country as immigrants. Others were temporary residents, who came for better education, better jobs, better standards of living. After the September 11th attacks, the President succeeded in scaring the nation, embedding more and more fear in his people, convincing them that the enemy was still around, and that he would “hunt them down and kill them.”

The hunt began. Brown was the enemy. But did they even know who “Brown” was?

The Party Invitation

My father lived in Wisconsin and then in Washington DC from the late sixties until the late eighties. And when he speaks of America then, he speaks of a different America.

His America is one where he felt liberated and un-judged. An America where it was easy to integrate to, and be accepted by, society, regardless of his broken English and his
brown, Arab, Muslim status. He does not claim that there was no racism; he did experience some, but not any more than others, Arabs and non-Arabs, and did not regard it as “American” racism, but as racism from a few people, and so it did not bother him much.

My America is different.

He told me a story once, which he later published in Al-Bayyan, a local newspaper in the United Arab Emirates, of an incident that occurred once when he went back to DC after spending the summer in the U.A.E. My father did not notice that his U.S visa had expired until he was told by a customs officer at Washington Dulles International Airport. After about fifteen minutes, and fifty cents to pay for the new visa, he was out of the Airport and on his way to his apartment.

In July of 2001, just after I decided to come to MIT, my student visa took four weeks to issue. Two years later, when I had to renew it, I sat through a one hour interview, “Why do you need a visa to the U.S?” was the first question they asked me at the American Embassy in Abu-Dhabi.

“Umm…I have two years left before I graduate from MIT,” I said. I bet they could have figured that out themselves- my old visa stated that I had completed two years at MIT, and why else would I be requesting a renewal?

“Do you plan to travel? Do you plan to work? You know that it is illegal to work in the U.S if you are on a student visa, right? Are you part of any political groups? How much money do you have? Do you plan to stay in the U.S after you graduate? You realize it is illegal to stay in the U.S if you don’t have a work or visit visa.”
A visa to the U.S is like a party invitation with a timer, and as soon as it stops ticking, you’re either granted another invitation or you’re kicked out of the party.

I won’t complain too much—at least I got re-invited; other Arabs were declined a visa. It wasn’t too bad if they were freshmen and had to find another university somewhere else in the world to accept them, but some of them were juniors and seniors.

The Myth

The media in the U.S hardly ever talks about the Middle East unless its politics—wars, terrorists, Saddam Hussein, Muslim fanatics. And Arabs in the U.S, myself included, have not put enough effort into showing the other side—the Middle Eastern culture, its music, literature, food, *souks*—therefore, many people do not know the real Middle East.

I did not realize that when I first came to MIT, so the first time I told someone I was from the U.A.E, I was surprised that they did not know where that was. “It’s in the Middle East, close to Saudi Arabia,” I said.

“Oh cool, so you live in a tent and go to school on a camel,” some guy said, during freshman orientation. I thought he was joking; I didn’t expect people smart enough to be at MIT to think that Arabs live in tents, so I “played along” and told him that he was right. I only found out that he was serious when he asked, “But then, how did you find out about MIT?”

“Oh, we have internet connections in our tents, and TV’s and stuff,” I said. It was a harmless joke, and also it was fun to see his reaction.
“That’s so cool. So you guys have pyramids in your country too?” He was extremely serious, I was extremely surprised.

“Oh..no. Those are in Egypt,” I said, and then he told me how he always wanted to go to Egypt to see the pharaohs. I hope he knew they were all dead, and all you really see are tombs and mummies in museums.

“I knew you were Arab from the first minute I saw you. You sort of look like Cleopatra,” he said. And how did she look? Brown with black hair and eyes?

As I met more people at MIT who asked me if I lived in a tent and went to school on a camel, my story became more and more farfetched. I told them how normal people live in regular tents and have camels with one hump, and how the richer people live in a two-floor tent, and have camels with two humps. When they asked me if we have oil in our back yards, I said, “Oh yeah. You know how you guys have water in your swimming pools? We have oil in ours.”

The tent story was fun for some time, but after a while it became frustrating. After that, when someone asked me if I lived in a tent and went to school on a camel, I said, “No, do you?”

“No, man. I’m from New York.”

“And I’m from Dubai.”
I’m not a terrorist, Dick!

After the September eleventh attacks, America was angry, and directed this anger towards Arabs, or anyone that resembled them.

I remember walking along Memorial Drive with a friend, Richard, from one of my classes some weeks after the attack. His name isn’t really Richard, but let’s call him that anyway. Don’t get me wrong, he doesn’t look like a “Richard,” but I picked that name, specifically, so that I can call him “Dick” and get away with it. I was telling Dick how I found the chemistry class we were both taking difficult, but he wasn’t interested in what I was saying. He had a more interesting topic to talk about. Dick pointed at the Prudential Center and asked, “Is that your next target?”

“Excuse me?” I said. I heard him the first time, but his comment took me by surprise.

“You’re Arab, right? Is that your next target?” Dick asked, again.

I wanted to say a million things, but I did not know what to say or where to start. Was I supposed to explain to him that Arabs aren’t terrorists? That we are good, peaceful people? Or was I supposed to say, “Fuck you, Dick”?

I didn’t say anything.

Dick wasn’t satisfied by my silence, and kept his monologue going, “At what age do they teach you how to make nuclear weapons?” he asked. Should I have said, “They don’t teach us that?” But he probably knew that already. Or maybe I should’ve said that they taught us that in kindergarten, but then again, if people believed the I-live-in-a-tent joke, he could’ve believed this one— and I wouldn’t want anyone to believe that.
Again, I said nothing.

“Hey, I was kidding, okay? You know, I can help you with chem; I’ve done all that at high school,” he said.

“I don’t need help from people like you and I’m not kidding.”

If comments like Dick’s were all that the Arabs in America got, the situation would have been easier to deal with; enough time would have fixed that. But it wasn’t just words.

I remember going to Starbuck’s on Boylston Street with a Saudi friend from MIT that September to meet some friends. Starbucks on a Friday afternoon was a popular hangout place for Arab students in Boston, and although, in the past, we had only smiled at one another and said *Marhaba*, after September 11 we became closer, sitting together and talking about the latest anti-Arab incidents: the guy who got stabbed, the guy in prison because he was driving a black truck, the guy who woke up one morning and found that “Get out you fucking Arab Islamist” was spray-painted on his car.

Some of these stories were real, others were exaggerated, and some were, possibly, fiction. But fiction or not, all the stories scared us.

Emran, a friend from high school, called me that October to tell me that he was leaving. “Emran, it’s only temporary. It will get better.” I told him, but he wasn’t convinced. “So you’re going to leave Georgetown to go to some unknown school in Italy?”

“Yeah. I’m not happy here. Plus, the girls are prettier in Italy,” he said. A week later, he was on Alitalia, Rome-bound. A lot of other Arabs left Boston and the United
States, heading to Canada, Europe or back home to the Middle East—places they felt would be safer.

It hit me that so many people had left when I went to Starbucks one Friday and noticed that there was a shade of Brown that was missing.

Adopting a Different Brown

The stories that my parents heard, in Dubai, about Arabs being attacked in America were scarier than the ones we heard about here.

“Habibti, if anyone asks you if you’re Arabic, just say no. Say you’re Indian,” my mother told me, after she heard about the post-September 11 attacks.

“Mama, I’m okay. Really, it’s fine here,” I said.

“Ok, just take care. And try not to speak Arabic when you’re out,” she said.

Was it really so bad in America that I had to pretend I was someone I’m not? Maybe not, but the word maybe contains doubt.

I told a friend about the conversation with my mother, hoping that he would tell me that it wasn’t really necessary to pretend not to be Arabic. Instead, he said, “She’s right, it’s safer like that, and it’s not like you’re losing anything, right?”

But Arab is my identity. If I lose my identity, wouldn’t I be losing everything?

Someone on Newbury Street randomly asked me if I was from Honduras, I nodded and kept walking. Somehow, I convinced myself that a nod doesn’t definitely mean yes; I didn’t lose my identity then, I lost it sometime afterwards. I went to a fast-
food restaurant in Boston, and a woman sitting alone watched me as I walked through the door. After I placed my order, she said, “I can smell an Arab from a thousand miles.” She was talking to me.

“I’m not Arabic,” I said, and after hesitating I added, “I’m from Honduras.” She didn’t say anything, and the look on her face didn’t say anything either. Did she know I was lying? Could she see that I was hiding my identity-- my real Brown?

The woman walked towards me, and stood close enough for me to smell the alcohol in her breath, then said, “You fucking immigrant.” She walked away, but only for seconds; a time too short for me react or run away or call for help. Fear blinded me, left me speechless. It paralyzed all of me except my heart, which was beating uncontrollably, racing against time. She then grabbed a chair and slammed it inches away from my feet, “Stick this up your mother’s cunt,” she said. A waiter who saw what happened grabbed her arm and asked her to leave, then apologized to me, and gave me my sandwich for free.

Today, three years after the incident, I still shiver when I remember it or talk about it. And I also shiver when I remember how I replaced my own brown with a different shade. I was a coward; I lost my identity and what did I gain? A free sandwich— I was still attacked.

But I wasn’t alone. One of my friends once told me not to say the “S” word in public. I had asked her, on the bus to Harvard Square, if she was going home to Saudi Arabia for winter break— the “S” word being Saudi Arabia.

Others Arabs hid their brown identities behind bleached hair and blue contact lenses.
The Worst Combination at Logan Airport

It always takes me hours to get through customs at Logan airport, as they ask me question after question—some relevant, others not—until they decide it is safe to let me on the flight. Questioning starts when I hand in my passport to check-in, and doesn’t end until I am on the flight two hours later.

My passport is navy blue, and has a picture of a golden falcon on its front cover. In the falcon’s heart, there is a picture of a boat and the sea. And also in gold, it holds the name in of my country, the United Arab Emirates, in Arabic and in English.

My passport is my travel companion, and its pages hold memories of every country I have visited. As I flip through it, I remember stories, of countries and cultures and people.

My passport is my link to home, and a declaration of my identity.

My passport makes me proud.

But with this passport and my brown skin and my Arabic name, airports are never pleasant. The worst trip was my first back to the UAE after spending a term at MIT, in December of 2001. As I was checking in, David, from behind the check-in counter, said, “Can you take your suitcase and step to the side.” David pointed to his left at two security guards sitting around a desk.

“Over there? Where the two guys are standing?” I also pointed at the two security guards. He nodded.
I have been in and out of airports at least twice a year, every year, all my life, and I have never been asked to take my suitcases to any security guards. I put on my best smile, and said, “Hi.”

They said hi back, and then one guy helped me put my suitcase on the desk and said, “You’ve been randomly selected by our computers to be searched. I have a few questions for you.”

“Okay.” I was still smiling.

“Have you packed your suitcase alone?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Did anyone help you pack your suitcase?” Isn’t this question exactly like the one before?

“No.”

“Have you left your baggage unattended at any time? No one has given you anything to pack in your suitcase? Does everything in this suitcase belong to you?” No. No. Yes.

“Can you please open your suitcase?” I did what he told me, although I didn’t want to because there was so much in my suitcase that I had to sit on it to zip it closed.

He took out tee-shirts, jeans, and hair products. “You have so much of this, why?” he asked, pointing at two cans of pink hair spray.

“My cousin asked me to buy it for her. They don’t sell it in Abu-Dhabi.”

“I’m sorry ma’am; I’m going to have to ask you to leave it out. Those cans may explode with the pressure.” I agreed to leave them out.
He kept looking through my suitcase, taking out makeup, tampons, accessories.

“What’s in here?” He inquired, as he put his hand in the compartment where I stored my underwear.

“Dirty underwear,” I said, and his hand shot out so fast, I barely saw it. He turned red, and was (I hope) disgusted.

“You’re all set, ma’am. Thank you.”

I checked my suitcase, put my passport in my backpack, and walked to the line winding up to security. I stepped through the metal detector without it beeping, but I was told to step to the side, take my shoes off and wait because I was randomly selected to be checked.

I sat quietly by ‘Mohammed’ and ‘Omar’ and ‘Abdullah’—also randomly selected—and waited for my turn. I’ve taken enough probability classes to know that there is almost a zero probability of selecting all the brown people out of all the other travelers. I wouldn’t have a problem if they didn’t claim it was a fair, random selection process, but obviously it wasn’t—it was brown selection.

After they had checked my shoes, emptied my backpack, and asked me why I had so many lenses for my camera, I was told to go back to my seat because they wanted to ask me a few questions.

I didn’t smile when I sat across from the officer who questioned me. I glared at him deliberately, wanting to show him that I have had enough of their “random selection” bullshit.

“I’m sorry for your inconvenience, ma’am, but we question random travelers. It’s for better security within the airport,” he said. “Where do you study?”
“MIT.”

“What do you study? Why? How much money do you have? Forty? That’s a lot of money? You look like you’re in a bad mood, is there something wrong? Good…I’ll carry on then.”

What would possibly be wrong? All they did was asked me almost a million questions in two hours, checked every part of my luggage that could be checked, and did the same to every person that looked Arabic, then called it a fair, random, computer-selection. Yes, I was in a bad mood, and all I wanted to know was how their computers managed to select only brown.

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I came to the United States four years ago, hoping to see my father’s America and have a story similar to his to tell, but I have a different one. It is a story about a shade of brown that America was angry at, and sometimes hated, and sometimes feared. It is the story of my identity, which was once lost but soon found again. And the story of my Arab status: my name, my passport. My brown.