Sade and four of his twenty-something friends are at a hookah café almost underneath the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in Brooklyn. It’s late, but the summer heat is strong and hangs in the air. They sit on the sidewalk in a circle, water pipes bubbling between their white plastic chairs.

Sade is upset. He recently found out that his close friend of almost four years was an undercover police detective sent to spy on him, his friends, and his community. Even the guy’s name, Kamil Pasha, was fake, which particularly irked the twenty-four-year-old Palestinian American. After appearing as a surprise witness at a recent terrorism trial in Brooklyn, Pasha vanished. That’s when Sade discovered the truth.

“I was very hurt,” he says. “Was it friendship, or was he doing his job?” He takes a puff from his water pipe. “I felt betrayed.” The smoke comes out thick and smells like apples. “How could I not have seen this? The guy had four bank accounts! He was always asking for a receipt wherever we went. He had an empty apartment: a treadmill, a TV, and a mattress. No food, no wardrobe.” He shakes his head. “We were stupid not to figure it out.

“You have to know the family,” Sade says. He points to those around
the circle. "His mother is my aunt. I've known him since I was in second grade. I know where his family lives, and he's also my cousin," he says, ticking off each person in turn. He gets to me. "You I'm not so sure about!" he says, and all the young men laugh loudly.

Informants and spies are regular conversation topics in the age of terror, a time when friendships are tested, trust disappears, and tragedy becomes comedy. If questioning friendship isn't enough, Sade has also had other problems to deal with. Sacked from his Wall Street job, he is convinced that the termination stemmed from his Jerusalem birthplace. Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim invectives were routinely slung at him there, and he's happier now in a technology firm owned and staffed by other hyphenated Americans. But the last several years have taken their toll. I ask him about life after September 11 for Arab Americans. "We're the new blacks," he says. "You know that, right?"

How does it feel to be a problem? Just over a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois asked that very question in his American classic The Souls of Black Folk, and he offered an answer. "Being a problem is a strange experience," he wrote, "peculiar even," no doubt evoking the "peculiar institution" of slavery. Du Bois composed his text during Jim Crow, a time of official racial segregation that deliberately obscured to the wider world the human details of African-American life. Determined to pull back "the veil" separating populations, he showed his readers a fuller picture of the black experience, including "the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls."

A century later, Arabs and Muslim Americans are the new "problem" of American society, but there have of course been others. Native Americans, labeled "merciless Indian savages" by the Declaration of Independence, were said to be beyond civilization and able to comprehend only the brute language of force. With the rise of Catholic immigration to the country in the nineteenth century, Irish and Italian Americans were attacked for their religion. They suffered mob violence and frequent accusations of holding papal loyalties above republican values. During World War I, German Americans were loathed and reviled, sauerkraut was redubbed "liberty cabbage," and several states banned the teaching of German, convinced that the language itself promoted un-American values. Between the world wars, anti-Semitism drove Jewish Americans out of universities and jobs and fueled wild and pernicious conspiracy theories concerning warfare and world domination. Japanese Americans were herded like cattle into internment camps during World War II (as were smaller numbers of German, Italian, Hungarian, and Romanian Americans). Chinese Americans were commonly suspected of harboring Communist sympathies during the McCarthy era, frequently losing careers and livelihoods. And Hispanic Americans have long been seen as outsider threats to American culture, even though their presence here predates the formation of the present-day United States.

But since the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Arabs and Muslims, two groups virtually unknown to most Americans prior to 2001, now hold the dubious distinction of being the first new communities of suspicion after the hard-won victories of the civil-rights era. Even if prejudice continues to persist in our society, the American creed of fairness was now supposed to mean that we ought to be judged not by our religion, gender, color, or country of origin but simply by the content of our individual characters. The terrorist attacks, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the explosion of political violence around the world have put that dream in jeopardy for American Arabs and Muslims. In the eyes of some Americans, they have become collectively known as dangerous outsiders. Bias crimes against Arabs, Muslims, and those assumed to be Arab or Muslim spiked 1,700 percent in the first six months after September 11 and have never since returned to their pre-2001 levels. A USA Today/Gallup Poll from 2006 shows that 39 percent of Americans admit to holding prejudice against Muslims and believe that all Muslims—U.S. citizens included—should carry special IDs. Different studies from
The story for the moment

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the University of Illinois at Chicago, Harvard, and Purdue have each concluded that the more positively one feels about the United States, the more likely one is to harbor anti-Arab feelings. Hostility remains high.

Government policies certainly haven't helped the situation. Mass arrests following the attacks increased generalized suspicion against Arabs and Muslims in this country. The government demanded that nonimmigrant males from twenty-four Muslim-majority countries register their whereabouts in this country, leading to deportation proceedings against almost fourteen thousand people. And racial profiling, almost universally loathed prior to 2001, assumed a new lease on life in 2003 when President George W. Bush ordered a ban on the practice but included "exceptions permitting use of race and ethnicity to combat potential terrorist attacks."

While it could now be said that profiling other groups was officially and legally un-American, profiling Arabs and Muslims made good national-security sense.

But what exactly is a profile? It's a sketch in charcoal, the simplified contours of a face, a silhouette in black and white, a textbook description of a personality. By definition a profile draws an incomplete picture. It substitutes recognition for detail. It is what an outsider from the street observes when looking through the windowpane of someone else's life.

Profiling Arabs and Muslims has in reality expanded far beyond the realms of law enforcement. Arab and Muslim Americans are now routinely profiled in their places of employment, in housing, for public-opinion polls, and in the media. Yet they remain curiously unknown. Broadly speaking, the representations that describe them tend to fall into two types, the exceptional assimilated immigrant or the violent fundamentalist, with very little room in between. The questions they are asked in the media and in real life constantly circle simplistically around the same frames of reference—terrorism, women, and assimilation—fixations that may be understandable in this age but frequently overlook the complex human dimensions of Muslim-American or Arab-American life. Terms such as "moderate" and "radical" are bandied about so freely as to mean next to nothing, and clichéd phrases like "sleepers cells," "alienated Muslims," "radicalization," and "homegrown terrorists" degrade the language to the point that they structure the thinking about the Muslims living among us.

It seems barely an exaggeration to say that Arab and Muslim Americans are constantly talked about but almost never heard from. The problem is not that they lack representations but that they have too many. And these are all abstractions. Arabs and Muslims have become a foreign-policy issue, an argument on the domestic agenda, a law-enforcement priority, and a point of well-meaning concern. They appear as shadowy characters on terror television shows, have become objects of sociological inquiry, and get paraded around as puppets for public diplomacy. Pop culture is awash with their images. Hookah cafes entice East Village socialites, fashionistas appropriate the checkered kaffiyah scarf, and Prince sings an ode to a young Arab-American girl. They are floating everywhere in the virtual landscape of the national imagination, as either villains of Islam or victims of Arab culture. Yet as in the postmodern world in which we live, sometimes when you are everywhere, you are really nowhere.

Frankly, it's beleaguering: like living on a treadmill, an exhausting condition. University of Michigan anthropologists Sally Howell and Andrew Shryock succinctly describe the situation when they write that "in the aftermath of 9/11, Arab and Muslim Americans have been compelled, time and again, to apologize for acts they did not commit, to condemn acts they never condoned and to openly profess loyalties that, for most U.S. citizens, are merely assumed." Yet despite the apologies, condemnations, and professions, their voices still aren't heard. And while so many terrible things have happened in the past years, plenty of good things have also occurred, from Japanese-American groups speaking out against today's wartime policies, to prominent civil-rights activists fighting for due process for Muslim and Arab clients, to ordinary people reaching out to one another in everyday encounters. Much of this happens quietly in church basements, in mosques holding open houses, in Jewish centers, or in university or community halls, but such events too are often obscured, drowned out by the ideology of our age. Yet what most remains in the shadows today are the human dimensions to how Arabs and Muslims live their lives, the
rhythms of their work and days, the varieties of their religious experiences, the obstacles they face, and the efforts they shoulder to overcome them. In other words, what is absent is how they understand the meanings of their religion, the passions of their sorrow, and the struggle of their souls. But in today’s landscape, none of that seems to matter. One could say that in the dawning years of the twenty-first century, when Arabs are the new chic and Islam is all the rage, Muslims and Arabs have become essentially a nagging problem to solve, one way or another.

And being a problem is a strange experience—frustrating, even.

This book was conceived out of my frustrations, but it is not about me. It is about the generation behind me, twenty-something Arab Americans who since 2001 have had to navigate a rocky terrain somewhere between expectation and frustration. I know what it is like to be Arab and Muslim today, but what is it like, I wondered, to be young, Arab, and Muslim in the age of terror? I began exploring this question in early 2005, spending my time with Brooklyn’s Arab-American youth, and this book is the answer to my question. In it I have attempted to employ the power of narrative, to tell the stories of seven different Arab Americans from Brooklyn as richly and accurately as I could.

The main character in this book is youth. To be young is to be at a crossroads in life. It is a time to discover who you are, what values you hold, and which friendships you will cherish. This is true for all young people. But for young Arab Americans today, to be young is also more complicated, for it means that you are living a paradox. On the one hand, the older generation looks hopefully to you with the belief that you will produce a better world for yourself, for your family and community, and for your nation. On the other, the culture at large increasingly spies you with mounting levels of fear, aversion, and occasionally outright hostility. Today’s young Arab Americans often live uncomfortably between these expectations.

Moreover, there are many of them. Like most immigrant populations, both Arab and Muslim Americans are younger than the general population. Twenty-one percent of the American public is between eighteen and thirty years of age, but 30 percent of American Muslims are. The median age of Arab Americans is thirty-one, compared to thirty-five for the whole of the United States. This also means that many young Arabs and Muslims have no adult experience of the world prior to September 11. And while, nationally, Arabs and Muslims are generally more affluent than average Americans, in Brooklyn, the setting of this book, many come from working-class backgrounds, where they are driving their way through the maze of the American dream on paths that have become more complicated for all those who are young, Arab, and Muslim. They are often anxious about their futures, and their anxieties reveal much, not only about their own personalities but also about the tensions evident in contemporary American society.

This book concentrates on Arab Americans and focuses on Arab Muslim Americans for the simple reason that the Muslim-American experience is capacious and sprawling. It contains many different moments of arrival and dozens of different ethnic histories. The Arab-American story, on the other hand, is more coherent and self-contained. It relates a community to the specific overseas geography of the Arab world, where much of the “war on terror” is raging. It is true and necessary to point out that the Arab-American community is a majority Christian population, but it is also true that Arab-American Muslims are at the eye of today’s storms. They are the ones forced to reconcile particular American foreign policies that affect their countries of origin with the idea that their faith poses an existential threat to Western civilization. Even the one chapter in this book that tells the story of an Arab-American Christian, Sami, relates how he must navigate the minefield of associations the public has of Arabs as well as the expectations that Muslim Arab Americans have of him as an Arab-American soldier.

If youth is the central character here, Brooklyn is the setting. Abstractions thrive when people are removed from their contexts, but grounding a story in one place has allowed me to explore the concrete details of lived
experience within a single geography. My reasons for choosing Brooklyn are multiple. Besides its proximity to what is now known as Ground Zero, Brooklyn has the largest Arab-American population in the nation. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, close to 36,000 live in Brooklyn, about half of New York City’s total Arab-American population. Dearborn, Michigan, the unofficial capital of Arab America, may have a much higher concentration of Arab Americans by orders of magnitude, but Brooklyn’s Arab population is more numerous than even Dearborn’s (at around 30,000). (The Arab-American Institute believes that the census underreports Arab Americans and puts Brooklyn’s Arab Americans at around 120,000 people.)

Yet far more important than base numbers is the borough itself. Brooklyn is “chiefly no whole or recognizable animal,” writes James Agee, “but an exorbitant pulsing mass of scarcely discernible cellular jellies and tissues.” With more than 2.5 million residents, it is the third-largest metropolitan area in the country. Size alone does not account for its energy. Robber barons, refugees, free blacks, and the international working class have all settled here, whether in leafy Victorian mansions or in limestone, brownstone, or Federal-style row houses, making the story of Brooklyn a short history of human escape and reinvention flattened through geography and narrated through architecture. Walt Whitman once called it the city of “homes and churches,” and yet it is more. A country on its own, Brooklyn continuously repopulates itself, first by boat and ferry and now by planeloads of the world’s exiles and émigrés, and it brims with the rhythms and pageantry of twenty-first-century American life.

Today Brooklyn is Prospect Heights with its late-night barbershops, all fabulous hair and atomic white light at 12:00 a.m., or Coney Island, a seasonal experiment in radical democracy held in a riot of colors and soundtracked to amusement-park songs. It’s the Friday-afternoon call to prayer in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Brooklyn is a tourist-free Chinatown in Sunset Park or the dollar stores of Flatbush Avenue that spill their wares onto the noisy street and away from their weeping, scarred, and aching buildings. It’s dreadlocked West Indians flying kites in Prospect Park or the colony of Middle American defectors in Williamsburg, urban hipsters costumed in androgynous jeans and monotonous tattoos. It’s the bourgeoisie of Brooklyn Heights, living in stately grace but with barely suppressed feelings of self-loathing for not owning a 212 area code. Brooklyn is the slowly dissolving Italian hub of Bensonhurst, the Syrian Jews of Ocean Parkway, and the Pakistanis of Coney Island Avenue. It is the birds of Green-Wood Cemetery singing their songs to the Civil War dead, upper-crust Haitians living well in Midwood Estates, and intrepid diners visiting Bay Ridge’s transplanted Mediterranean coast, where, high on the old Nordic Third Avenue, sea air mingles with the garlic aromas floating out of the Arab, Greek, and Italian eateries that line the street. Brooklyn is the informal urban apartheid of Eastern Parkway, the soft socialism of Park Slope, the Russian capitalism of Brighton Beach. It’s the Salt Marshes of Marine Park, the roast beef sandwiches on Nostrand Avenue, Di Fara’s Pizza, Vox Pop, and Vinegar Hill. Brooklyn is the dangerous rush of traffic on Atlantic Avenue, where bus exhaust mixes with the smells of fresh bread and Arabic spices; it is the madness of Pacific Street, where parents seek refuge from the urban cacophony in its tiny community garden, and Dean Street, where the Chinese food is halal. Brooklyn is the concentrated, unedited, twenty-first-century answer to who we, as Americans, are as a people.

After deciding on the setting, I began asking friends what stories they knew about the contemporary Arab-American existence here, and those friends were soon asking their friends on my behalf. I talked to community leaders and introduced myself to imams at local Islamic centers. Although my own background is both Arab and Muslim, I don’t live in Bay Ridge, the neighborhood in Brooklyn with the highest concentration of Arab Americans, and most of my Arab and Muslim friends and associates prior to my writing this book were older and came from the academic world. I was, in other words, both an insider and outsider to the community. Since Muslim communities around the country now often feel under the blunt hammer of suspicion, I was concerned that those I spoke to might be leery of me and my interest, but my worries were quickly allayed. One Friday after prayer, for example, an imam invited me to his office upstairs, sat me down, and pulled out his little book. Instead of reading off problems or
lecturing me about how I should represent the community, he began telling me about a Muslim woman he knows. "She’s Egyptian, with a master’s degree from Denmark," he told me. "Do you want to meet her?" He was trying to marry me off. I smiled and thanked him gently. "Ley, ya Moustafa?" he asked me. "Heya helwa, ezzay al beshoosa." Why, Moustafa? he asked. She’s sweet, like Egyptian honey cake!

Before long my efforts were paying off; even if the imam’s didn’t. I gained enough confidence with the community to attend a closed-door meeting between community leaders and the FBI. These were the first FBI agents I’d ever met, and they looked as if they had just walked out of a movie. They stared you in the eye and repeated your name while shaking your hand. They all had similar, almost military-tight haircuts. And, except for the Moroccan agent with them (inexplicably dressed in brown), they all wore sharp suits in navy blue and spoke with the same diction of officialdom. Later I realized how the twelve community leaders present—speaking with accents and in Arabic with each other, mostly darker-skinned, accompanied by a mystical-looking sheikh, and breaking in the middle of the meeting for prayer—must have looked like movie characters to them. But, as everyone knows, in the movies we are the bad guys.

The three-hour meeting was an example of the failed communication that marks our era. Seemingly unaware of the irony in their statements, the FBI told the community leaders, a group of successful physicians and businessmen who had already contributed much to multicultural America, that the Bureau wanted to "bring the Arab Muslim community to this melting-pot country" and "to instill a sense of love for our precious freedoms." They demanded that the community leaders condemn terrorism in front of them, which they willingly did. Meanwhile, the community leaders wanted to talk about other issues, like the crisis in local charitable donations, fallen sharply since the government shut down several national charities, and how government surveillance was scaring people away from community activities. They wanted to know how to get off the no-fly list. To these the FBI had little to add. ("Our only answer is to get to the airport early," they said about the no-fly list.) Everyone was polite and well-meaning throughout, but in their clash of priorities, the meeting might have been held in two different languages. I left depressed and frustrated.

My inquiries had spread by word of mouth, and people also began contacting me about the project. I set up rendezvous with people in their favorite locations, usually Brooklyn’s busy coffee shops, smoky hookah cafés, quiet mosques, noisy youth centers, and hectic diners. Before long I had the stories that make up this book. Nevertheless, there are gaps, countless other people I did not include, and I make no claims that these seven narratives touch on every detail of Arab-American life. Over the course of writing this book, I heard many other accounts from people, including the young Syrian-American medical student who was unceremoniously detained at an airport, a procedure that has now become a sad routine commonly known as "flying while Muslim" (or sometimes TWA, "traveling while Arab"). Another is the Palestinian-American firefighter who wanted to climb the fire department’s ladder of promotion. The study material he needed for his exam is expensive, so he purchased a cheaper copy from an outside vendor. Instead of finding the book in the mail, however, he received a visit to his home. Two investigators from the Joint Terrorism Task Force wanted to know why a man with an Arab name was interested in a book about fires. ("You didn’t check to see if I’m a firefighter?" he asked them in frustration.) But the loudest silence in the book concerns those young Arabs, a minority, who have abandoned their ethnic roots or religion out of either shame or fear or both. They have changed their names and try to pass as other-than-Arab—Latinos most often. Perhaps it is fitting that “The Biography of the Ex-Arab Man or Woman” is present here only by its absence.

What you will find are seven Arab-American narratives that are in the end very American stories about race, religion, and civil rights and about how the pressures of domestic life and foreign policy push on individual lives. Some of the young people in this book are friends with one another, but only I know all of them. I have changed the names of some people to protect their privacy. They are students and grocery-store clerks, teenagers and twenty-somethings, community workers and soldiers. They are religious and secular, male and female. What they want most is what the ma-
jority of young adults desire: opportunity, marriage, happiness, and the chance to fulfill their potential. But what they have now are extra loads to carry, burdens that often include workplace discrimination, warfare in their countries of origin, government surveillance, the disappearance of friends or family, threats of vigilante violence, a host of cultural misunderstandings, and all kinds of other problems that thrive in the age of terror.

And yet this is far from a gloomy book. In fact, I have developed a great deal of optimism through its writing. What I have found is that young Arab Americans understand both the adversities they face and the opportunities they have with an enviable maturity. They have a keen awareness about their lives, an acute kind of double consciousness that comprehends the widening gap between how they see themselves and how they are seen by the culture at large. They live with their multiple identities and are able to draw connections to the struggles others have faced in our American past. These young men and women have been raised by immigrant parents and educated in a post-civil-rights-era America. They bring with them a deep, sometimes first-hand, understanding of the conflicts raging in the Middle East and at the same time are well versed in the recurring battles for equality in the United States. They often draw lessons from this past to their own lives, reading themselves through the pages of American history. This is a remarkable trait often missing today, where telling someone he’s “history” is the equivalent to telling her that life is over. But their lives are just beginning.

Stories connect us to each other. In ways that polemics and polls cannot, they can reveal our conflicts within ourselves and our vulnerabilities to each other. Stories can describe why certain choices are made and others are passed over, and they can reveal the colors of our emotions. Stories have the capacity to convert a line drawing into flesh, to dislodge the power of the presumption and prejudice. Perhaps this explains why I responded the way I did to the many inquiries I heard from friends and associates after I described the project of this book to them. “Oh, you’re writing profiles,” they would say.

“Portraits,” I would answer. “Hasn’t there been enough profiling already?”