

Becoming Bedouin: Daughter, Teacher, Sister

Maryah Converse

“What’s that *ajnabiyya* doing on the bus to Faiha’?”

“That’s no foreigner! That’s our daughter, Maryah al-Harashseh.”

I. The Village Faiha’

When Peace Corps Jordan placed me in a small hilltop village in the north, I went intending to teach English and learn Arabic in return. In my Peace Corps interview, I had specifically indicated an interest in serving Arab families, a culture foreign and considered antagonistic to my own by some. It was April 2004, just after the invasion of Iraq to the east. The people of little Faiha’ upended my assumptions, and I unsettled at least some of theirs. That I had expected.

I never expected to become one of them.

Before I arrived, the school headmistress made it known across the small, sprawling village that I was to be treated with the respect due her own daughters. The lines of family loyalty in Arab culture are both malleable and absolute. By her declaration, I was family, completely and indisputably, and the rules were clear to everyone in town. Disrespect me and you disrespected the headmistress and all the neighboring households.

Families were tight-knit in Faiha’. My little white cinderblock house was flanked by those of the headmistress,



her sister Umm Anis, and their uncle, who was also their father-in-law—the sisters had married brothers from among their cousins.

Families were also large. Umm Anis and her husband Abu Anis were the parents of a son Anis, seven years old when I arrived; a daughter Alya, fifteen; a daughter Aaliya, thirteen; a son Hamza, five; a daughter Noor, three; and a baby on the way. And me.

The headmistress did treat me like a daughter, fed me whenever I dropped by, occasionally summoned me to help her with chores or cooking. Yet, though it took me longer to recognize the bond we were building, it was her sister Umm Anis who really made me feel like family.

II. Umm Anis

She was my same average height, which in rural Jordan made us tall women. She was active, not skinny but slender. Like even the old grandmothers in the village, Umm Anis was limber from living all her life in households where the furniture was mostly *fershaat*—raw wool ticks or synthetic foam mattresses on the floor, with matching pillows against the walls behind and bolsters over the seams between. Women generally sat upright, their legs crossed in their skirts or stretched out straight under a light blanket, while men lounged on one hip against a bolster, knees and feet pulled up under their caftans. In the semi-nomadic Bedouin households of Umm Anis's great-grandmothers, those bolsters were camel saddles.

One Friday afternoon, less than a month after I moved to Faiha', Umm Anis had pulled the *fershaat* out on the cool tile of the side porch, where she preferred to spend her time during spring and summer. It was south-facing and roofless,



with the prevailing easterly wind usually blowing across the porch end-to-end. The side porch was a perfect venue for relaxing and chatting over a pot of strong, sweet black tea, poured into little gold-rimmed glasses over sprigs of fresh sage or thyme from the garden at the tile's edge.

Abu Anis was home for the first lazy afternoon since I had moved in next door. He was a loud, friendly man who worked for the Ministry of Energy. He had been escorting a German telecom team for the last few weeks while I began to settle into the neighborhood. In part because of his perfect English, he was often away for weeks at a time, accompanying foreign consultants and contractors.

He was telling us about his trip and the incomprehensible things that foreigners do. He told me his stories mostly in English, though it was clear that Umm Anis could follow along. And he had a burning question from his trip. "These German guys said they don't believe in God. A lot of foreigners tell me they don't believe in God. Is that possible? Do you believe in God?"

"Well..." I hesitated. I had often had this conversation as an agnostic kid in rural America, and I had my arsenal of answers prepared. But that schoolgirl had been snarky, defensive, combative, often angry, and her American classmates understood atheism, even if they found it morally repugnant.

It seemed incomprehensible to Abu Anis that anyone could lack a basic belief in God. I hedged, avoiding the choice between a conciliatory lie and too much truth. "I know many Americans and Germans who believe in God," I said.

He saw right through my carefully worded response. "That's not what I asked," said Abu Anis with a shake of his head. "I asked if you believe in God. Not other Americans. You."



I took a deep breath, thinking about the day in training when the Country Director said, “As an employee of the United States government, I can’t ask you about your religion. So I’m just going to recommend that, unless you’re Muslim, tell people you’re Christian when they ask. And they will ask!” Another day, after I had asked a staff member a question about the differing stories of Abraham in the Old Testament and the Qu’ran, the director said, “I won’t ask you if you’re Jewish, but if you tell people in Jordan that you’re Jewish, you’ll be answering difficult questions about Israel all the time. It’s probably better to say you’re Christian.”

Fresh out of training, though, I wasn’t entirely ready to bend to this cultural norm yet. That defensive, self-righteous kid was not so far removed from my present self as I wanted to believe.

Looking Abu Anis in the eye, I shrugged, “Well, no. I don’t believe in God.”

They stared at me. I could see a dozen questions in Umm Anis’s eyes that we didn’t have enough shared language to discuss. Abu Anis said, “But how is that possible? *Ya’ni*—I mean, where do you think the world came from, if it wasn’t created by God? Where did human beings come from?”

“*Ya’ni*, I guess I believe in science,” I said, a little taken aback. I expected Abu Anis—well educated, with his perfect English and exposure to other cultures—to have a less literal interpretation of creation.

I spoke of geology and physics. I struggled to put my explanations into a combination of my broken Arabic and simple English that Abu Anis would understand. He looked more and more concerned for my soul, a look I knew well from my childhood in Bible country. I started to sense that I had made a mistake, had admitted to something I should have lied about, had maybe even torpedoed my chance for



effective service to the families of Faiha' before it had begun.

Then I heard laughing voices approaching around the corner of the house. "This conversation is over," said Umm Anis softly. "The children are coming."

I don't know what Umm Anis said to her husband later. Although Abu Anis would occasionally explain elements of Islam to me over the next two years, he never again asked about my personal beliefs.

Perhaps, though, it was my unflinching honesty that brought out the same in Umm Anis.

One day, I was walking home from school with her oldest daughter, ninth grader Alya. It was about two miles back to our homes, and I relished the twice-daily exercise. Parents and teachers found my desire to walk strange, but the village children loved to accompany me along the way.

This particular midday, Faiha' was easing into the dry, blustery heat of summer, though its cinderblock construction still kept the school on the cool side. Halfway home, I began to regret the jacket I had worn out of the building.

"What are you doing?" asked Alya sharply.

My brow crinkled in surprise. "Taking off my jacket. It's hot."

Later that day, I dropped by Umm Anis's house. Alya had told her about our walk home. "You can't do that," Umm Anis said.

I was confused. "It was just my jacket, that's all."

"No. You can't do that. Don't do it again." She clicked her tongue with that upward jerk of the chin that in Jordan says more clearly than anything, 'No, and no arguing.'

I came to rely on Umm Anis to tell me what I needed to know, without holding back, kind but firm. She taught me to navigate her culture just as she taught her children, but



with the respect of a sister who knew I didn't have to be told twice. I depended on her to correct a mistake once and never mention it again, knowing I had understood the gravity of her words.

III. Privacy and Loneliness

Umm Anis did not wield the same obvious power and bold public opinions her sister displayed, but she was still a quiet power in her world—in her family, her household, her neighborhood. With sharp eyes and ears, and an army of nieces and nephews, Umm Anis missed nothing.

I was sitting on the *fershaat* on her side porch again with Umm and Abu Anis. The girls made us a pot of tea, poured over sprigs of mint fresh from the garden at our outstretched feet.

They were speaking sporadically in Arabic, in the casual manner of couples who have been together long enough to be comfortable with each other's silence. I wasn't really listening, letting my mind wander as the Arabic washed over me.

My attention snagged when Umm Anis told Abu Anis about something that I had been doing in my living room the day before. She never made eye contact or any indication I was sitting right there. I didn't let on that my Arabic was good enough to understand.

Abu Anis gave her a sharp look. "And how do you know what she was doing inside her house?" he asked.

"Well," she shrugged, "I watch her through her windows."

The Bedouin are traditionally a communal culture. Arabic doesn't have a word for "privacy." The women and girls I



knew in Faiha', daughters of a desert heritage where being separated from your tribe meant death, were terrified of being alone. So was everyone they knew. From their perspective, it was clearly human nature, so obviously I must be afraid of solitude, too.

Especially in those first few months in Faiha', I heard this often. "Aren't you afraid? Don't you worry that something might happen to you?"

Consequently, I was rarely alone. Sometimes it was middle sister Aaliya and her next-door cousin Aiat with their English homework, or younger kids asking endless questions about my family photos. Sometimes, it was their second cousins down the road, demanding that I do their homework for them, or give them something of mine that they desperately wanted. An older A-level student might chase out the younger ones so I could check their work on a practice test for the *tawjihi* school-leaving exam. Whenever I was home, there were children in my home.

After the sunset *adhan* had rung out from the mosques, they would beg me to sleep at their houses. Especially at night, they worried that if they left me to sleep alone in my little house, I would be snatched by kidnappers. Or attacked by feral dogs. Or poisoned by the little pink gecko that lived at the top of my bedroom walls. They had a dozen reasons why I should be afraid.

After a while, I discovered that the constant invasion of my space was encouraged by Umm Anis. She would look out of her window and into mine, then snag her daughter or niece and say, "*Ya Haram!*—Oh, woe! Poor Maryah! She's all alone in her house. She must be terrified! You'd better go over there and keep her company."

"Just try to imagine," I said one day to her older daughter



Alya, “living all day, every day in English. Speaking it, hearing it, trying to understand, to learn it. Imagine you’re in America and no one speaks Arabic and you need English to eat, take the bus, at school, at home. All the time. Try to imagine it.”

I watched Alya try to picture a life of English. I wonder if she, too, was thinking about my site visit, a month before I had moved into the house beside hers. On that first visit, she had been glued to my side as my interpreter and guide to Faiha’, using every scrap and shard of English she had ever collected.

“Can you imagine it? Can you imagine how very tired that would make you, all English all the time?”

She didn’t reply, but her eyes spoke volumes.

“That’s how I feel. I love you all, and I love your company, and I love Arabic and want to learn it and live in it. But at the end of the day, I need two hours to myself, without people, without Arabic, just me.”

To my surprise, it worked. I won some much needed evening introvert time, and it felt good to carve out that time for myself. Immersion in Bedouin culture made me really understand what solitude meant to me.

I could sit at the open window, listening to the kids play on the shared lawn, re-watching episodes of *Dark Angel*, or half of *Dances With Wolves*. I identified powerfully with the mutant girl hoping for love and acceptance in a post-apocalyptic barter economy, and the lonely colonizer in an uneasy truce with both his neighbors and his shifting moral universe.

After a couple weeks, I noticed that Umm Anis and her sister weren’t summoning me to their uncle’s house in the evenings anymore.



At first, I was relieved. Sometimes as many as ten adults squeezed into the ten by twelve foot cinderblock box of a house. One had a fussy baby, another a grumpy sleep-drunk toddler, and eighteen other cousins ran in and out. They talked over the television, over each other, laughed loud and long. A cacophony of Arabic. Even when I wasn't listening, my brain was working overtime to process all the language around me.

Late one afternoon, Alya, Aaliya and their next-door cousin Aiat were finishing up some homework when Aaliya asked, "Why don't you come to Grandpa's after sunset anymore?"

Trying to deny my bruised feelings, I shrugged. "Because you don't invite me anymore. You used to shout to me from the yard every night."

They gave me an affectionately confused look I would come to know well. Alya, a little older and my self-appointed cultural translator, shook her head. "You don't need an invitation."

My childhood of introverted New England reserve had not prepared me for this. "My mother always says, you never drop in on someone without an invitation."

"Just come over," Alya said, still shaking her head at my silly foreign ways. "You're family."

Sometimes I did. And sometimes Alya or her sisters or brothers would knock or shout from the yard to invite me, just to be sure I was included.

IV. Afternoon Routines

Once my evenings were sorted, it was not long before afternoons became a new, different sort of tension.

I was encouraged to design an after-school English



program, and I tried a few failed experiments with an empty room of my little house in those first few months. An English conversation class, a grammar enrichment class for the university-bound, an afterschool homework clinic.

Eventually, everyone's enthusiasm for such initiatives petered out until I was down to just two dedicated disciples and a familiar routine. After lunch, Aaliya and her next-door cousin Aiat would show up with their English homework. Despite their best attempts at persuading me to just give them answers, eventually they realized I was always going to make them work for their educations. Once convinced, though, they worked diligently and made noticeable progress in both what they learned, and how.

Sometimes, though, they showed up before I had finished eating, or before I had even finished cooking. Or they showed up later than usual, after I had decided to clean my bathroom with the unexpectedly free afternoon. I would say, "I can't help you right now, I'm sorry. Can you come back in an hour?" They would give me that familiar bemused look, then walk away.

Then one afternoon, Umm Anis and her next-door sister-in-law were knocking on my door. "Did you just tell our daughters that you can't help them with their homework today?"

"No," I said slowly. "I just asked them to come back later. I'm in the middle of scrubbing my toilet."

"Now, Maryah," said Umm Anis, gently but firmly, "if you really want to live as an Arab among the Arabs, like you say you do, there's something you need to understand about the Arabs. When someone asks you for help, you don't ask them to come back when it's more convenient for you. You stop what you're doing and help, right away. That's what we



do.”

“Okay.” I paused, collected my thoughts. This made sense for the lone traveler seeking assistance in the Arabian desert, but... “Here’s the thing, though. When someone asks you for help, and you’re in the middle of cleaning, you have one or three daughters who will finish cleaning while you help. When your daughters ask me for help and I’m in the middle of cooking dinner, if I stop, my dinner burns. I don’t have anyone else to finish the job, and then I don’t eat.”

They looked at each other and me, pondering. They didn’t know a single person other than me who lived alone, and had never really paused to consider the practical implications. “We’ll let you finish,” they finally said.

Umm Anis began sending one of her kids across the rocky ground between our homes at least three times a week with a plate of whatever she was serving to her family for the large midday meal. She sent Anis with a plate for his grandparents’ lunch almost every day, too, so it took me months to connect my meals back to our conversation.

I was faster to hear about another effect of this conversation. “Poor Maryah, *ya Haram*,” she began saying to her nieces and nephews and the other neighborhood children. “She lives alone with no one to help with cooking and housework. When she does something nice for you, like helping you with your English homework, you should be doing something to help her, too.”

Now, when Aaliya and Aiat came with their homework and I was still eating, they pushed me out of the kitchen to finish my lunch while they washed all my dishes and made tea. Only then would we sit down to do their English homework together.

One day, Aaliya asked, “Do you think it would be okay if



we brought our math and science homework, too?”

“I don’t know if I can help you with that,” I hedged.

“Oh, we know that. It’s just so quiet here. It’s nice.”

V. Ramadan

Umm Anis’s last month of pregnancy was the Muslim holy month of fasting from food and water from first light to sunset. It didn’t slow her down. Quite the opposite. Her sister worked almost as many hours as ever at school, without food or drink, supervising teachers who also weren’t eating, and kids who were mostly fasting, too. Umm Anis seemed compelled to compensate for her sister’s long afternoon naps. After her own early nap, Umm Anis would be in the kitchen, creating massive quantities of rice-heavy main dishes, as well as salads and sides, fresh rosewater and lemonade, and special Ramadan desserts drenched in simple syrup.

Ramadan is also a time for visiting with family, and on at least half the twenty-eight nights of the fast, there were aunts, cousins, grandparents and more distant family visiting from out of town. Her in-laws often hosted the guests after dinner, but Umm Anis provided most of the food. Her daughters, sister and sisters-in-law helped, but Umm Anis was quietly in charge. In Ramadan, the housewives in Faiha’ also sent their kids around to all their neighbors with plates of whatever they were cooking, but Umm Anis’s plates were a little fuller, a little more sumptuous. She was an excellent cook.

Near the end of Ramadan, Umm Anis had her baby, a girl they eventually named Siddeen. Nursing mothers are exempt from the fast, but everyone else was fasting. Even her youngest children, though not required, insisted on trying to fast three-quarter days “like a grownup!”

On her first afternoon back in Faiha’, Umm Anis sent



her youngest to fetch me to the family room. “I know you’re fasting to understand us better,” she said, “and that’s a good thing. But you’re not fasting for God and your faith. Will you break your fast with me? It’s lonely to eat by myself.”

And so, I didn’t quite fast for all of Ramadan.

VI. Winter

The dry desert heat gave way to daily downpours and temperatures dipping towards freezing. My single propane space heater barely took the edge off the cold in my uninsulated cinderblock house. I wore layer upon layer of thick cotton and wool, slept in my clothes, and spent most of my days under a duvet thick with raw wool. Some afternoons, though, I would be invited to Umm Anis’s family room for supper and a telenovela with the family.

Umm Anis had two large space heaters and seven or more bodies spending most of the day and night on plush carpet and thick *fershaat* in her family room. I became more comfortable with inviting myself over, reveling in the opportunity to leave a sweater or two hanging by her side door on my way in. One of the daughters would slip into the kitchen to make the ubiquitous pot of sweet black tea. Umm Anis might be helping her sons with their English homework.

I rarely heard her speak English, and never more than a couple words at a time, but Umm Anis knew the elementary textbooks inside and out. When my aunt, a monolingual American, came to visit me in Faiha’, she and Umm Anis were fast friends before I even had the chance to introduce them. Each speaking her own language, somehow they understood each other perfectly.

For the village of Faiha’ and I, understanding each other



was an unending frustration and delight. “Why do you always wear socks?” asked Aaliya one afternoon. Everyone looked up. They all regularly dashed back and forth across the shared lawn in plastic shower shoes, even in an early morning dusting of snow, and often a mismatched pair not their size that slipped off frequently on the uneven ground.

My thick wool L.L. Bean boot socks, by contrast, never left my feet, even in sleep. “My mother always says, when your feet are warm, the rest of you is warm.”

“Are you listening?” Umm Anis pointed out quickly to her five lounging children. “When you ask Maryah a question, what does she say? How often does she start with, ‘My mother always says...’? Why can’t you be more like Maryah and listen to your mother?”

Like any well-loved child might, they rolled their eyes and pretended to ignore their mother.

“Have you prayed yet?” Umm Anis might ask her children while I visited. “Get up and pray.”

One of the girls would get up, pull on a long seersucker skirt with a one-size-fits-all elastic waistband over her pajama pants, and drape her whole upper body in a matching seersucker *khimaar* prayer shawl. She pulled a prayer rug down off the top of the television and laid it on the carpet facing an empty section of the long eastern wall of the family room.

I was deeply touched by this ritual every time I witnessed it. Prayer in Islam is meant to be done in community. In this particular setting, though, it always felt intimate, an indication of their ease at my intrusion into their daily lives and practices.

Then the next daughter would go, and then the little one side-by-side with her littler brother.



Another rainy winter evening, I left my dripping wool cape and coat by the door, but kept my long wool knit jacket over a short wool sweater. Umm Anis had a new diesel stove heating the family room, and I was quickly too hot. I peeled off the jacket. The sweater underneath was a slim fit and ended just above the hip, but with only Umm Anis and her children around, it was modest enough.

I knew that Abu Anis had been away for nearly two weeks, escorting another team of foreign engineers around Jordan. “When will he be back?” I asked.

“Tonight, *inshallah*—God willing,” said Umm Anis. I knew she had been missing him.

Later, when I heard the front door open, I grabbed my long-knit jacket, pulling it back on. It was their next-door cousin Aiat, borrowing a cup of sugar. I slipped out of my jacket again.

Umm Anis peered sharply at her daughters. “Did you see that? Maryah heard the door and thought your father was coming home, and she put her jacket back on. Why can’t you be more like Maryah? She’s a better Muslim than you are!”

Her niece and daughters rolled their eyes and smiled.

VII. Spring

The following spring, Aaliya asked me one day over her English homework, “Do you think we could have lunch here with you?” When I hesitated, Aiat jumped in to add, “We’ll bring all the ingredients! We’ll just cook it here, in your kitchen, and then we can do homework.”

We started cooking together every couple weeks. I taught them how to make Kraft macaroni and cheese, and introduced them to peanut butter and Nutella. They taught



me how to make *baba ghanoush* and *galayat bandourah*—stewed tomatoes. Aaliya and Aiat spread out newspapers on the floor, put out the food and big flat rounds of bread, and we ate together. Then they would wash dishes and all the floors in the house before we sat down to do English homework.

Once, they got my permission to have a bigger party, inviting all their girl cousins to my house, including the headmistress's eldest daughter Alaa'. They kept begging me to make more food. "One more box of macaroni!" and "Just open one more can of clotted cream!" and I kept saying, "No. It will be enough." I couldn't predict when or how often Umm Anis would feed me, so I tried not to have leftovers in my fridge. My mother hates to waste food, and too many families right there in Faiha' had too little.

Finally, we all sat down to eat. Everyone ate their fill, with not a scrap of food left before us. The girls started whispering to each other, watching me with side-eyes, tittering.

"What? What's going on?"

"You're more *sunna* than us!" giggled Aaliya.

Sunna, I knew, is the example of the Prophet Mohammad and the first Muslim community in Medina, how they dressed and cut their hair and treated each other. It is the template for how all Muslims should behave. But I didn't understand the connection. "What do you mean?"

They tittered, and finally Alaa' gathered her first-year university student dignity and explained, "The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said you should never cook more food than you can eat in one sitting. They didn't have refrigerators fourteen hundred years ago, you know, so it wasn't safe. But our mothers always make twice as much as we need and keep plates of leftovers in the fridge. You



always make exactly as much food as you're going to eat, just like today. You're more *sunna*—a better Muslim than we are."

VIII. Bedouin

Most Saturday afternoons, after picking up macaroni and Nutella at the big Safeway in the nearest city, I would be sitting towards the back of the mid-sized bus, waiting for it to be full enough to depart. Sometimes, a local man would stick his head in, take a long look at me, and ask the bus driver, "What's that *ajnabiyya* doing on your bus? What could she possibly want in Faiha'?"

"*Ajnabiyya*?" All three of the drivers always had the same easy response. "That's no foreigner! She's our daughter, Maryah al-Harabsheh."

After Peace Corps, my mother said, "When we visited you in Faiha', we could see you had a family and good friends there. But Umm Anis was your mother and your sister, the one who really took care of you."

Without her, I would not be Maryah al-Harabsheh.

