

# Abu Arif & His Daughters

*by* Aline Carriere

I will tell you what I remember of Abu Arif, but you must understand it was twenty years ago. No, even more than that now. He was the cook on our excavation, a Roman fortress, near Karak in Jordan, in the middle of the desert. We made our camp in Turkish ruins. Among the old stones the Bedou had a shop where we could buy Marie biscuits. We called it the Bedouin 7-11.

Abu Arif made cucumbers with yogurt, and hummus and something with hard boiled eggs in it. After eating hummus everyday for six weeks, I couldn't eat it again for years. We would get bread—pita bread—fresh and hot from Karak. Nabil, the Jordanian official who oversaw the site would bring it in the morning. For dinner Abu Arif made lamb. Yes, lamb is what I remember most. And hot sugared tea served in a glass. Once when I vomited from the heat he gave me orange juice and let me lie on his cot in the kitchen. Orange juice in the middle of nowhere.

After dinner Abu Arif told stories. He sprinkled words in Arabic and taught us their meanings. Some I remember still: Yalla, hurry; shucran, thank you; afwan, your welcome; midfadlak, please. And meshnoon, crazy; and malesh, it doesn't matter, nevermind. The words stood out like stars. When he finished he said, "You don't believe me? It's true. In my country, in your country, even in Turkey."

On weekends we went to Amman. A long drive, past camels and more desert, and a shop by the side of the road where craftsmen made amphora. We used the large clay pots at the site to hold water and they made the water taste bad.

One weekend Abu Arif invited me to his home in Amman. His daughter was visiting him with his grandson. He also had a younger daughter who lived at home. Both of his daughters spoke English and they were smart and beautiful with long dark hair. They wore make-up and slinky dresses even though I, as a Westerner, had to wear long sleeves and loose fitting clothes. That weekend Abu

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Arif went with me to the marketplace and I bought a kafilah for my mother, soft and embroidered white on white.

One night Abu Arif and his daughters and their families gathered. I cannot remember what the celebration was for, but the baby was at its center. We passed him around, a sweet smiling boy about seven months old. The age when babies can sit but can't yet crawl and their thighs get plump. We took turns dancing with a scarf tied around our hips, hands raised in the air. Even Abu Arif danced.

I asked Abu Arif's daughter, the mother of the baby, where she was from.

"Palestine," she said.

I didn't ask her to explain. I knew there was no Palestine, but yet it was her home.

That's all I remember. I can't tell you any more. Except that when I hear of a suicide bomber—a young man in his twenties—I think of the laughing chubby baby who knew nothing of hate, nothing of despair.

