



AS SALAM ALAYKOM FAISAL'S STORY

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Faisal Alzhrani with Keiron Galloway

Keiron gratefully acknowledges the support of 26TEN and TCAL



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As Salam Alaykom Faisal's Story

Sometimes it takes
A great sky
To find that
First, bright
And indescribable
Wedge of freedom
In your own heart...

David Whyte – *"The Journey"*

Dear Faisal,
May you find freedom,
truth and friendship in your life.



Faisal's Story

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began...*

*You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations – – –
though their melancholy
was terrible. It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.*

– Mary Oliver, 'The Journey'

Faisal is a 26 year old man from Saudi Arabia with a warm, friendly smile. He grew up in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, as the eldest of six children. He was devoutly religious, and like all Saudi boys, he had attended an all-boys school. He listened to Western music, socialised with his neighbours and family, and played soccer.

Saudis follow a devout form of Islam called Wahhabism. They pray five times a day for around 30 minutes each time. The timing depends on the sun and changes every day. Modern Saudis use smart phones to track prayer times. It is the only Arab country that claims Sharia, or Islamic law, as its sole legal code.

In Riyadh there are no dance clubs, theatres or cinemas. There are many mosques, giant shopping malls and Western fast food outlets such as McDonalds, Burger King and Taco Bell. Restaurants and cafes are segregated, with men usually occupying the front of the restaurant, and women and families behind a partition in the back.



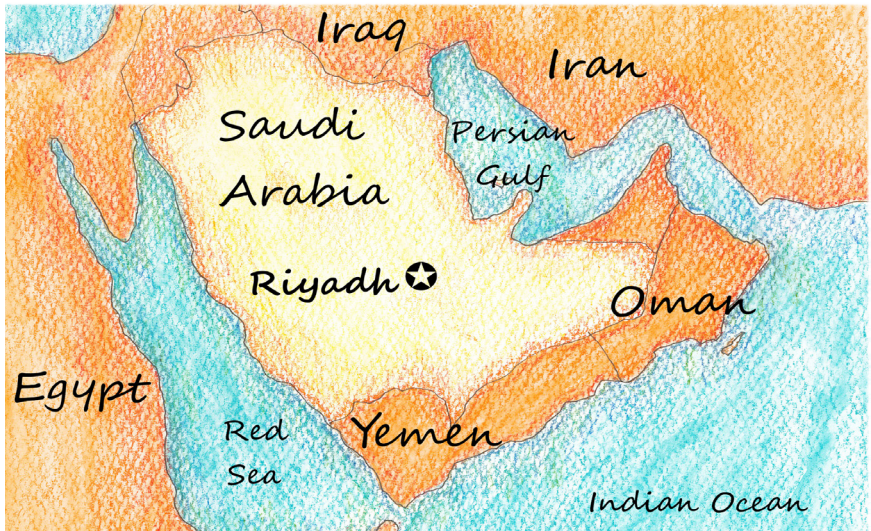
Faisal

Men and women do not generally mix unless they are related. Religious police are employed by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. They are tasked with implementing Islamic sharia law. They punish unrelated men and women 'intermingling' in public areas and enforce dress codes.

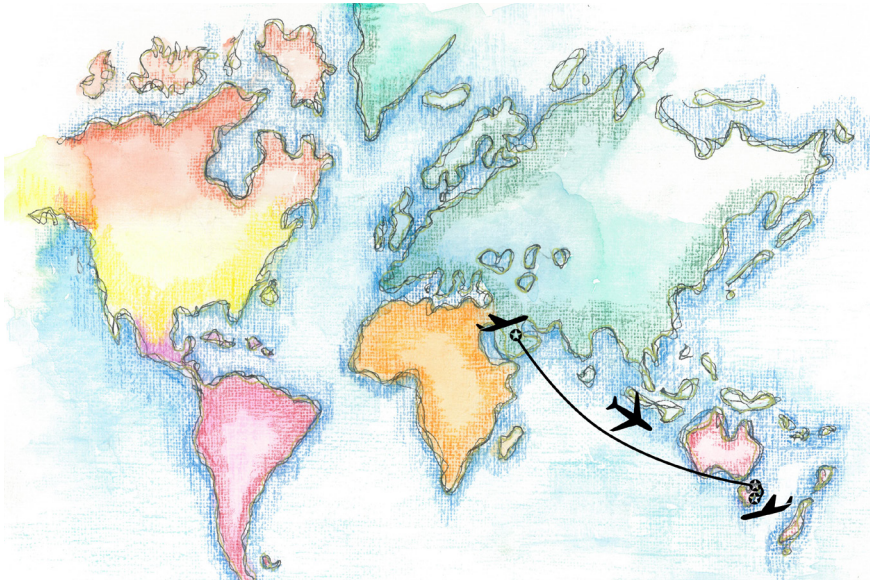
Women live with fewer freedoms than men. They can't appear in public uncovered and usually wear a full length gown, known as an Abaya, over their dress, which may be modern Western, as well as the head-covering Niqab that covers everything apart from eyes. They may also wear a Shayla, a black gauzy scarf that is wrapped around the head and secured with circlets or jewellery.

Women are not allowed to drive and rely on drivers to transport them. They require a male relative's permission to work and travel overseas. Women do not watch or play sport.

When Faisal was 18, he needed to make a decision about what he would do with his future. He loved Western music, especially Britney Spears and Avril Lavigne. He thought that he would like to learn English and work as a translator. He had an uncle who lived in Australia with his wife, so Faisal applied to the Saudi Government to learn English in Australia. He was granted a student visa and arrived in Australia in 2008.



Map of Saudi Arabia



Faisal's journey to Australia

Living In Australia

Faisal's family were happy for him to travel to Launceston to live with his uncle and study English at the University of Tasmania. He studied with a group of Saudi students who were mostly in their thirties. He enjoyed studying and living with his family.

When Faisal arrived in Australia, he was overwhelmed and then excited by the multiculturalism, diversity and choices available. There was so much choice in entertainment, food and social opportunities. He embraced the freedom and tried a variety of activities as well as food from different countries. Faisal was keen to see a movie at the cinema. He couldn't wait for somebody to invite him. He went alone and was surprised that people thought this was unusual. As well as enjoying movies he learnt swing dance and salsa, and danced with women. He was enjoying life.

As Faisal grew up he was fascinated by Roger Federer. He had seen him play tennis on Saudi television. In Australia, Faisal joined a tennis club and truly believed that he could excel at the sport and become world class. Doubters told him he was too old, but he worked hard and tried his best until he realised that it probably was too late for him and he would not be competing with Roger Federer. Now he plays for fun.

Faisal read widely and discovered a love of science. The science taught in Saudi Arabia is limited to be compatible with the strict teachings of the Koran. In his reading, Faisal was amazed to discover Darwin and Einstein and many scientific theories that opened his mind. He started to question his beliefs and his religion.

Faisal was enjoying living in Australia and he decided to commence a degree in Human Resource Management. He found university study very difficult. His level of English and his research skills were not sufficient to complete the assignments easily. Where other students would ask for help and assistance he did not have the confidence. He struggled for three semesters.



Faisal in Saudi Arabia in 2010

By mid-2012, Faisal was stressed, unwell and losing weight. He could no longer continue with university or pretend to be a Muslim. He renounced his religion. He did not tell his family of his decision as he was afraid they would reject him. It is not possible to live in Saudi Arabia without following Islam. He knew he could never return.

Faisal surrendered his student visa and applied for onshore asylum. He applied for a permanent visa under Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program. To qualify, he had to meet the refugee criteria under the 1951 Refugee Convention. He was interviewed and had to pass health, character and security checks.

The Saudi Government contacted Faisal and asked him why he had not returned to Saudi. He revealed that he had renounced Islam. The Saudi Government told him not to tell his family as it would upset them. They discontinued his scholarship and he had no means of support. He was not aware that he was eligible for financial assistance from the Australian Government.

The next two years of waiting to be granted asylum were very difficult and stressful. Faisal lost a lot of weight and was unhealthy and anxious. For the first six months he did not have any financial independence. He lived with other family members in Hobart and worked as a salesman in their business in exchange for food and board. After six months, they told him that things were difficult for them and they could not afford to keep him.

Faisal approached the Australian Red Cross for assistance with food and shelter. They told him that he was eligible for Government assistance. With this assistance he was able to pay rent to share a flat, buy food and pay for transportation. This made life a lot easier, and for the first time he was independent.

In 2014, Faisal was granted a permanent visa by the Australian Government. He was very happy.



Faisal's family home



*Almamlaka Tower, central Riyadh
(image: creative commons from Wikipedia)*

The Future

*But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do — — — determined to save
the only life you could save.
— Mary Oliver, 'The Journey'*

Faisal is now 26 and would probably be married if he lived in Saudi Arabia. His younger brother is married and has one child. Marriage in Saudi Arabia is generally arranged between families and neighbours who make plans for suitable young couples to meet. They talk for a few minutes and if they like each other, and it feels right, the couple will agree to marry.

In Saudi Arabia there is no other way to meet a prospective partner. The genders do not mix. There are no entertainment options to attend such as cinemas, theatres, sporting events or concerts. People socialise with their families and neighbours. Neighbours are very friendly and invite each other for meals and spend time together. The most popular pastime for men is to drive around the city and towns either alone or with a friend. They drive around and around listening to Arabic music.

Faisal has missed the friendships of his homeland. He has tried to make friends, and for a while he had a best friend, but he moved to Melbourne. He finds opportunities to make new friends limited.



Faisal enjoying Australia

Recently, Faisal studied a Certificate III course in Fitness where he met a number of young people. He was surprised that during the half hour lunch break they all sat together at one table to eat their lunch. Instead of talking with each other, all of the other students spent the time looking at their mobile phones. He also found that people he met at his tennis club didn't socialise with members outside the club. He shares a flat with another man but he is not friendly with his neighbours. This can be a lonely life.

Faisal does not currently have paid employment. He volunteers at the Migrant Resource Centre three days a week. He assists with the Car Cafe, Youth Job Line and project support. Soon he will start additional volunteer work with the Red Cross, providing one-on-one support and friendship to new asylum seekers. He is looking forward to this work and is excited at the prospect of meeting new friends.

Faisal's confidence is building. One of the benefits of doing the fitness course was that Faisal's self-esteem grew and he learnt how to build his muscles and look after his body. When he was less confident he would sometimes be bullied or harassed in public. Now he is so comfortable that recently he spoke to his mother on his mobile phone in Arabic while he was on the bus. In the past, this has caused him problems.

Sometime in the future Faisal would love to study physics. Currently he is studying for the Australian citizenship test. Once he has citizenship, his goal is to join the Australian Army. He craves the order, routine and social opportunities the Army would provide. It would give him a social group, a job and a routine. He has not told his family he will not be returning to Saudi Arabia.



*The Australian Army in Afghanistan
(image: creative commons from Wikipedia)*

Resource list

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

www.iom.int

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

www.unhcr.org

Tasmanian Council for Adult Literacy (TCAL)

www.tcal.org.au

The Department of Education Tasmania

www.education.tas.gov.au

TasTAFE

www.tastafe.tas.edu.au

26TEN

www.26ten.tas.gov.au

Migrant Resource Centre

www.mrchobart.org.au

Refugee Council of Australia

www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Keiron Galloway and the Namste Book Series

www.keirongalloway.com.au

Faisal's Story is the sixth book
in the Namaste Book Series.

This book tells Faisal's story
of his journey from Saudi Arabia to Australia.

