

**Josie Gleave**

**The Outskirts of Benslimane**

I am called brave for leaving my home and moving to the other side of the world, but I know that any bravery I might have comes from my sister. She is the one who can effortlessly introduce herself to a crowd of new acquaintances or play the peacemaker in an argument. She climbs back on the horse that just bucked her off. I wanted to be her.

I have not seen my sister for over a year since I moved. It feels like ages to us who are often mistaken for twins. I stand on the edge of Paris at the Levallois-Perret train station where we are meeting for only a few short days. I arrived early, and she will fly in from her summer job in Morocco where she has been training horses for a family she claims is one of the wealthiest next to the King.

As I pace the platform, I pose the question: how does a twenty-something, female, Arizonan horse trainer end up in Morocco? There is a blank space in my mind when I think of that country. Instead I imagine a desert of sand and a solitary tiled palace with extensive stables full of black horses. I think of our parents in Arizona who I know have been uneasy for her safety. My own feelings of concern were that she would not be taken seriously or treated fairly. Americans feel loved within their homeland, but that warmth is not always reciprocated when abroad.

Like bees flitting out of the hive, Parisians flood the station. They are a swarm of blue suits and black dresses. I scan the faces of each traveller finding none that resemble my own. When the flight calms and I anticipate waiting for the next train, a statuesque female with long, straight hair rises on the escalator. She is zipped in a black jacket with an embroidered Arabian horse head over the heart, tired blue jeans,

cowboy boots, and a rhinestone belt with a horseshoe buckle. We squeal each other's names and hug. Together we weave through the streets, passing her lumpy duffle bag back and forth to rest our shoulders. My mind is teeming with questions and so I begin.

'How did you end up in Morocco?'

It started with Riley's phone call. He used to shoe for the same stables I worked for in Arizona, and so we would see each other from time to time at the show circuit. He rang me one day saying he had a job for me body clipping some horses for a photo shoot. He said the guy would pay well, three grand for the lot. I said I could get it done and asked for the location of the stable. He said Morocco, and I thought, like the country?

He called me on Monday, and I was on a flight that Wednesday. I only stayed a week that trip so I could get back for the second half of the university semester, but I got to know the owner, Anas, and his situation. His three main properties: the Villa, the Centre, and Comagree are all on the same road on the outskirts of Benslimane. His racing stable is on the coast of Mohammedia, a half hour away. Most of the show horses were stabled at the Villa while the Centre and Comagree had a mixture of agriculture fields, olive and citrus groves, donkeys, goats, cows, sheep, and miniature horses. Anas tries to make money out of his work, but his dad is content keeping him out of the city. See, Anas does everything extreme. He took partying to the extreme. Now he has over 500 head of horses. That is extreme. But it keeps him out of the city. That week, I just body clipped. Anas found out that I can ride and asked me to come back.

One month later, I was back on a plane to Morocco for the summer. To show me the land, Anas took me on his daily rounds. Every night he drove to each property to check up on the horses. He had pastures upon pastures of foals, yearlings, two year olds, three year olds, and pregnant mares. He didn't remember all of their names, but somehow he knew every pedigree. He would point to a horse and say, 'This horse was by this and sired by this horse and its grandfather was by this.' Sometimes he sat up all night long researching pedigrees, and if you weren't careful and didn't go to bed

on time you would be stuck there with him. Anas wanted to bring back the pure and traditional Barb. If you look them up, Barbs look like fat little ponies, but when you see them they are big boned with huge necks. According to Anas, a few years ago the Moroccan government was lax about accurate breed records. The Barb was disappearing and so anything that looked like a Barb was listed as a Barb to build the registry. While looking for a true bloodline, Anas was also breeding pure Egyptian Arabians and racehorses. He had more than a couple of projects in motion.

Anas set me up in the Villa. I had a room to myself with hot and cold running water and even occasional air conditioning. I was taken care of. The only problem I had was a rat that paid me a visit one night. Already I had a little mouse and two big geckos sharing my accommodation. There was no room for a rat. I locked it in the bathroom, but struggled to sleep. Every time I started to doze, I heard it scurry and bang into a wall or I dreamed that it was nibbling on my toes. In the morning it had left through the same hole it entered. I duct taped it tight.

From six in the morning to five at night, I worked with the horses. Anas had unrealistic expectations for the stallions' progress, but I still tried to please him. He wanted them prancing and doing tricks, but most couldn't ride in a straight line. Half of them weren't even broke before I arrived. I split my horses into two groups. The first I turned out to pasture to let them run and play in open space. The others I lunged in a round pen and the next day I rotated. I schooled the halter Arabs by training them to position their necks high and back legs outstretched and then I worked on breaking the stallions. Some of those studs were raunchy. I mean, I would take them out of their stalls and they would try to bite my head. They would strike at me, rear up, and come at me. When I was breaking Markmoul under saddle, all he would do was buck. What I found to work with Markmoul seemed to ring true for stallions in general. The more consistently I worked them and rode them, the better they became. They were easier to handle and weren't retarded. Let a stud sit for a bit, and they turn into mischief-makers. So I give them a job and it makes them happy. I think men are the same way.

My two years of high school Spanish were obviously of no use that summer. The people spoke a concoction of Arabic and French. A couple of guys at the stable took it upon themselves to educate me, which started as pointing at an object and stating its name. I kept a vocabulary list on my phone and botched the spelling of

every word so I could read it later. Ayoub and I became friends through this process. He worked at Comagree, but was close to my age so we went riding together and explored old ruins and roads. I don't know what language we spoke, but we could understand one another. We carried on full conversations in this odd foreign dialect that probably wasn't really a language.

One of my favourite evenings was when Ayoub and I drove to Mohammedia. I had been before to see the racehorses, but never at night. That is when the city comes alive. Whenever we were unsure of directions, we pulled over on the side of the road and Ayoub would call out to a lone vendor selling snail soup or cactus fruit. The people were helpful and friendly, almost too friendly with a tendency to jump in your car and take you to the place you are trying to go. We arrived at Mohammedia, walked along the boardwalk and watched a little carnival on the beach where there were horse rides and camel rides for children. Somehow Ayoub convinced me to ride the Ferris wheel. Terrible idea. It went around and around for what felt like an hour and it went fast! I am not great with heights, but that was hardly my primary concern. First of all, it was a carnival ride. Second of all, it was a carnival ride in Morocco. The hinges looked shabby with ropes and knots holding things together. My nervousness only encouraged Ayoub. He tried to shake the carriage so it would rattle and swing and then he would laugh and laugh.

Early in the month, Anas asked me to show some of the Arabs in halter. I told him I would if he really wanted me to, but I didn't think it was a good idea. The horses wouldn't have a fair show with me. Women aren't exactly repressed in Morocco, but they don't show horses. Even if I trotted out with the best Arab gelding, I would still be a woman. Anas knew the risk, but still thought that I deserved to flaunt my work. I told Anas his horses would have a better shot with me training and a man showing.

Morocco has its own politics and rules around horse shows. I let that be. In no other way was it a problem that I was a woman. The guys treated me a bit differently, but that was because I am a white American, and as a trainer I was a little bit higher than them. After they saw me manhandle a couple of the studs and bust my butt working and getting dirty just like them, they accepted me.

One day, all the guys and me were at Comagree looking at the Barbs used in Fantasia. We had just gone to the festival and seen the main competition where twenty men on Barb horses, dressed in traditional garb, gallop towards the audience and shoot their rifles into the air one time. The goal is to fire in unison so it sounds like one single shot ringing out, not popcorn. These Barb horses are a fiery breed. They are taught to dance and rear upon hearing certain Arabic words. One of the guys brought out this grey Barb and jumped on bareback. The horse took off down the road, reared on command like *The Man from Snowy River*, sprinted back toward us, and skidded to a halt. The man jumped off and said to me, ‘You?’

‘Yeah!’ I swung up on the grey without a thought of possible dangers. It was my chance to prove my riding ability. We galloped to the end of the road, and I repeated the Arabic commands. The Barb pranced and then reared, pawing the air. We shot off again and slid to a stop. The guys clapped and cheered for me. I slid off the Barb’s back and couldn’t stop smiling. Amongst the commotion, Said asked me something in Arabic. I was used to nodding and agreeing with what was asked of me even when I didn’t understand. Next thing I knew, he was kissing me! I guess you can’t say yes to everything.

As much as I loved Morocco, I did miss speaking English. What a relief when Enda arrived from Ireland. At least I had one person I could talk with easily. Enda was hired as a farrier, but he also helped exercise the horses with me. He loved to ride. But he had one problem; he had a massive appetite. Hajiba was our amazing cook who sourced most of our food from the properties. Everything she made was saucy and delicious, but Enda still said he couldn’t survive on three meals a day and no alcohol. He was pleased when the guys at Comagree invited both of us to another Fantasia festival. It turned out to be more of a post-wedding, bachelor’s party for some guy from the next town over, but it meant Enda’s belly would be full after the feast. I sat next to Enda and Ayoub and tried to not feel out of place as the only chick in the tent.

The people aren’t that big on plates or forks in Morocco, but they do have a strong sense of community. The men passed around a community bowl of water to dip your hands, community towel to dry your hands, and then one community glass of water to drink. I started with the cup, but turned my back for a second and it was gone. By the time I noticed, it was halfway around the table. I didn’t want it back. The

one thing I did get to myself was bread because it is eaten at every meal and used as utensils. When the banquet was laid before us, everyone dove in fingers first and used the round khobz to shovel lamb, potatoes, and carrots into their mouths.

After we ate, four girls entered the tent and danced. Everyone clapped along as the dancers waved their arms and flicked their hands as if flinging off water. One of the girls continued to sway as she climbed on top of the table. Then she turned to me and tried to pull me up alongside her. Um, no. But she didn't give up. She urged me to join her until the guys hollered for my submission. So I thought, when in Rome.... There was a lot of hair whipping and hip shaking, but I can't deny that it was fun. Once I jumped off of the table, everyone in the tent was on their feet dancing, clapping, and flicking their hands. I found Ayoub in the crowd and stayed close to him. He showed me some steps he knew, and I tried to teach him country dancing spins and dips. Enda was beside himself. 'How can a people act like this without a drop of alcohol?'

What I loved most was making friends. There was this one guy who lived down a road where I often went riding. I don't know his name, but we called him Avocado because he had green eyes. Whenever he saw me passing, he came out of his house to give me a piece of fruit. I loved that. People didn't have a whole lot, but they didn't need a whole lot. From what I saw, most of the people were happy. They were religious. They believed in a God. They believed in helping each other and doing what is right and being kind.

Oh, I almost forgot. Anas told me this joke. Why is the donkey's nose white? It's because his enemy is the children who pull his ears. When he went to Heaven he peeked his nose in, saw all of the children, and ran off.