

Practices

# Riding

Pardes Mandavi

**Riding**

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## **Practices**

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Pardis Mahdavi

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*For Tara*

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*CLICK. CLACK. CRACKLE. BOOM. The grass beneath my bare feet trembled, and an earth-shaking ba-boom, ba-boom reverberated through my body. I whipped my head around, and my headscarf fell to the ground. What was that? Where was it coming from? My heart skipped several beats, and I wondered—as I did many days living in Iran—if I was in danger.*

I had come to my ancestral homeland under the guise of studying the emerging feminist movement in Iran. But some part of me always knew that I'd really come in search of answers about myself and where I belonged in this world. Having grown up in the United States after my parents fled a home country in the throes of revolution, Iran, in my imagination, incited a mix of fear and fantasy. The images I saw on television as an elementary school child were of burning American flags, American hostages taken, and wailing women cloaked from head to toe in black. This was contrasted with the crackling voices of my aunts, cousins, and friends back in Iran during our weekly



phone calls. They told a story of a country with a rich history, a people with strength coursing through our veins, and a youth movement on the rise. When I could no longer stand to only dream about Iran, to fantasize about returning to an imagined homeland where I would finally fit in, finally make sense, finally belong, I decided it was time to go.

I arrived in Tehran in 2000, a fresh-faced twenty-one-year-old, and it took less than a week for me to fall completely in love with the country. I met new relatives, friends of the family, and people from my parents' past. Everyone was eager to show me

the “real Iran,” thrilled by my insatiable curiosity. And every night I followed my cousins and new friends into a wild underground scene of parties and politics. There, I blended in among throngs of my peers who were living life to an extreme I hadn’t experienced growing up in the United States.

This was a side of being Iranian that my family had kept from me. Frozen in the moment of their emigration, my parents, like many others in the diaspora, had raised their children to follow a version of the culture that didn’t really exist in the homeland. They’d convinced me that good Iranian girls didn’t date, except in an arranged fashion. My grandmother had burned it into my brain that my sole goal ought to be finding a husband, and many in the Iranian-American diaspora told me that being an Iranian feminist was a contradiction in terms.

They were wrong.

Despite, or rather because of, the relentless command of an older generation of conservatives who had taken power during the revolution, the young women I met in Tehran were in charge of their own sexualities; dating, mating, and sleeping with numerous men. These women were leading what they called a sexual revolution, or an *enghelab-i-jensi* in Persian. They talked constantly about their bodies, the resistance they embodied, and the desires they navigated and embraced. Unable to negotiate true citizenship with the state, they negotiated in the bedroom instead. They would take down the regime protesting not in the town square but from the most intimate spaces of their lives.

The Islamist regime that came to power during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 cast a dark shadow of austerity over the country. In public, Iranians were mandated to wear Islamic

dress and to refrain from activities such as listening to pop, rap, or heavy metal, dancing, drinking, or fraternizing with the opposite sex outside of marriage. I remember driving by a billboard with an enlarged photograph of Ayatollah Khomeini, the former supreme leader of Iran and the architect of the Iranian revolution. Khomeini was speaking a decree: “The Islamic Revolution was not about fun; there is no fun to be had in the Islamic Republic of Iran.” I watched under the light of a full moon as young people spray-painted over the quote while blasting Persian rap and taking turns gulping swigs of what I could only assume was illegally procured or home-brewed alcohol from a blazing silver flask.

Young Tehranis led me into darkened, emboldened corners of the city, and I was both thrilled and terrified to follow. We attended underground, illegal dance classes, raves in the mountains, house parties that shook the walls, and sensual poetry readings in abandoned warehouses. There were also sex parties, where it wasn’t uncommon for a hat filled with everyone’s keys to be passed around to determine who should hook up with whom.

But Iran’s sexual revolution wasn’t just about sex; it was sex *and* politics. The mullahs had assured their rise to power by promising the restoration of a certain moral order they claimed had been lost under the shah. They vowed to stop the “Westoxication” that had spread through Iran during much of the twentieth century, and they did so by shrouding the country in a false fabric of morality, a new “dark ages.” Young people recognized that this fabric had to be attacked by challenging the moral order. They nicknamed the morality police “the dark patrol” and called themselves “the dawn patrol.” A new

revolution was brewing, a movement that brought hope to so many people my age struggling with feelings of hopelessness.

In public—with a single strand of hair peeking out from their veils—they were slowly and as safely as possible questioning the regime's legitimacy. But behind closed doors they were quickly and not nearly so safely carving out the necessary spaces to explore, debate, love, breathe. For enhanced privacy, the young people often turned to the cover of the mountains. There, they engaged in intimate acts punishable by death.

This is what had led my date and me to the hills of Kordan, a suburb of Tehran covered in grassy hills and jagged mountains that kissed the cloudless blue sky. Kordan was a haven for Iranians of all ages. My parents' and grandparents' generations enjoyed the open spaces where they could see the sky and plant orchards to grow their favorite fruits. Elderly couples often sat in the shade of their own mulberry or barberry trees, reading a book and licking their fingers after munching on the berries with their delicious nectar. For my generation, Kordan provided a desperately needed escape from the watchful eyes of the crowded city of Tehran. Overgrown trees and bushes on the zigzagging trails up the mountains provided cover for canoodling lovers. Here young people felt more free to gather, dance, discuss political activities, and take in the quiet of nature.

Ali, an aspiring journalist, drove the twisting and stomach-turning roads through the hills until we arrived at a clearing at the foot of Mount Damavand. But before he had a chance to unfurl our fibrous woven blanket thick as carpet, the earth began to shake, and we heard a loud rhythm of pounding beats coming up the trail behind us. *Ba-boom. Ba-boom.* I was terrified. The dark shadow of danger made its way to me.



*What was happening?* The pounding grew louder, closer, and then I realized—we were hearing hoofbeats. Horses. When they finally came into view, they were magnificent, bold, certain. And riding atop them were women of equal magnificence and bold certainty. The riders opened their mouths and let out a high-pitched trilling.

*Hiiii-lllll-llll-lll-li. Hiii-llll-llll-li.*

I had only ever heard women make this sound at weddings and parties to signal budding romance. Here in the lush plains that grew in the shadow of one of Iran's highest peaks, it seemed both out of place and entirely at home.

I was entranced. They were a group of ten, all riding barefoot, bareback, and bit-free, their hair streaming in the wind behind them. The women were dressed in bright red, pink, and orange; some of them, riding hands-free, held weapons. The leader among them had a bow and arrow pulled taut. The two women who flanked her carried spears. But when the leader met my gaze, she smiled and lowered her weapon, clucking her tongue to signal the others to do the same.

*"Tiist."* She kicked her legs forward and sat deep into the groove of her black-and-brown horse, bringing him to a halt. The remaining women and horses followed.

They towered over Ali and me. I looked up at their faces, squinting to make out their expressions as the rays of sunshine formed haloes around them. Horses in every shade of black, brown, tan, and white blended perfectly into the chiseled sandstone bluffs that formed the base of the mountain. Some were tall and thin, others stockier with long, shaggy manes and tails. As they grew impatient, eager to be in motion again, they shook their heads and pounded the earth with their hooves.

Feeling ricocheted between horses and riders. Several of the women made clucking sounds to indicate to the trio at the head of the group that they, too, were ready to continue moving. The leader whipped her head to the left, causing the cascade of her long brown curls to fall across her horse's neck. The horse reared up on its hind legs, and the woman flashed a brilliant smile, revealing a dimple. Something inside me stirred when I locked eyes with her horse. He cycled his perfectly muscular two front legs in midair and then set them gently back on the ground. His rider let out a loud laugh that reverberated across the mountains and down my spine.

"Sorry to interrupt young love," she said, almost mockingly. She raised her perfectly arched eyebrows, and I cocked my head. An overwhelming wave of familiarity rushed through me as she spoke, but I couldn't place why or how.

I opened my mouth but found no words. Before I could gather my thoughts, the leader kicked her legs and clucked her tongue to turn not only her horse but all ten horses in the herd. As the drumlike hoofbeats filled the air once more, she turned to catch my eye one last time and winked. Her horse let out a proud neigh and galloped on.

I was quiet the entire drive home. Ali and I hadn't made out after all. Instead, I had watched the women ride off toward the hills, marveling at how their bodies moved in perfect unison with the horses, an almost choreographed dance of hips swishing in tune and time with the rippling muscles of their equines. All I could think of was finding a way to join them. At the age of twenty-two, I had never ridden a horse, but something inside me had shifted, and I understood riding was my destiny.

Later that day, I scoured the books and albums in my aunt's apartment in Tehran. I was searching for clues as to why the woman and horse I had looked at so often looked so familiar. My aunt came home to find me tearing through her library. She took my hand and gently led me to the kitchen, promising to help me find what I was looking for after we filled our bellies. At dinner, I told her the story of the women riders. She listened intently, and a Cheshire cat-like grin spread across her face.

"They sound like Persian warrior women," she said.

My whole body softened at her words. *Persian warrior women*. It had been the story of Gordafarid, the Persian warrior princess, that had first inspired me to learn about my ancestral home as a child, a homeland thousands of miles away that for so long had only existed in my fairy tales.

I was born into a heightened sense of danger. My parents had fled Iran during the Islamic Revolution of 1978. My mother, eight months pregnant with me, boarded what would be the last direct flight from Tehran to the United States for the next forty years. We landed in Minneapolis and began a new life, one my parents hoped would be temporary.

They never even fully unpacked in our Minnesota home by the lake. Farsi remained the only language spoken in our house, which was decorated like a Persian palace from a fairy tale. Time passed. I grew old enough to enter school, where I learned English and reading and math and carried a lunchbox packed with heavily scented Persian food—never mind the snickers and eyerolls from my mostly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant classmates.

The images of Iran on the television contrasted sharply with stories my grandmother and father told me about Persia. With

Iran and America at constant war, what of me, a person who was both countries in one body?

At night, after I finished puzzling through my homework, my father would read to my brother and me from the Persian epic the *Shahnameh*, or “Book of Kings.” It was not just a family favorite in the Mahdavi household but a national treasure. Part history, part legend, part mythology, the *Shahnameh* is one of the longest epics ever to be written. The Persian poet Ferdowsi penned the more than 50,000 two-line verses between 977 CE and 1010 CE. The epic focuses on the rise of the Persian Empire and the story of how greater Iran took shape. It is also about bravery, family, culture, and love. And while most of the stories, as the name suggests, are about kings and heroes, my grandmother, and later my daughter, would always point out that the poem should have been called *Shahbanonameh* or “Book of Queens.” The female characters, from the queens to the princesses to the brave warrior Gordafarid, were the linchpin to every story Ferdowsi told. The women and the horses.

The epic begins in what Baba called the “Mythical Age.” Ferdowsi started with the story of the creation of the world as believed by the Sasanians, the first people to explore and conquer, all on horseback. Save for the horses, this was my *least* favorite part. Two thirds of the epic focused on what was called the “Heroic Age.” And while most people fixated on the tales of the kings and conquerors like Alexander the Great, Manuchehr, the legendary Sasanian leader, and Rostam, the great Iranian *pahlevan* (warrior prince), my favorite stories were the ones about women like Tahmineh, the cunning princess who was Rostam’s lover and who gave birth to their son in

secret. I loved the power of Rudabe and Sudabe, women who inspired the great kings like Zal and Siyavash to lead armies of men and horses into lands unknown. But by far my very favorite was the great warrior princess, Gordafarid. The first time my father read me the story of Gordafarid, I almost cried with joy. Here was a woman I could relate to. Here was a story of real bravery. And it wasn't until much later in my life that I would look back at the six-year-old me, my heart aching for a little girl who related to warriors because she lived in a state of heightened danger, always worried what would come next, who would threaten her, when she would have to leave.

After dinner with my aunt, I went to bed and dreamed of Gordafarid, only now she had the face of the woman rider I had met that day in the hills. Like the Persian paintings that filled the hallways of my childhood home in Minneapolis, scenes of epic battles danced through my dream. But while those Qajar paintings only ever depicted men on horseback (women were shown cooking, dancing, or entertaining men), I dreamed of women wielding swords, bow and arrows, and spears, warriors facing their enemies head on. I didn't know it then, but those women fought with the same fear-induced adrenaline that they harnessed as power and that quietly ate away at them; the same fear that was propelling me forward to fight for belonging and success in my personal and professional lives and also slowly wearing me down in both.

I woke up the next morning determined to ride. I knew I had to learn to ride in my ancestral homeland, on horses that belonged to our native lands. But this would not be easy. Under the Islamic Republic of Iran in the early 2000s, horseback riding for women, particularly unmarried women, was contro-

versial. The hard-line clerics believed that equestrian sports could damage hymens, thereby rendering women ineligible for marriage. Others believed that even married women should not be seen straddling a large animal, for such a sight could ignite the fires of lust in nearby men. I would have to tread carefully to avoid being harassed or targeted by the watchful morality police, who would be happy to have a reason to arrest an Iranian-American woman studying sexual politics in Iran. The danger seduced me.

Luckily, a group of feminists I had been studying in the Iranian underground had a contact for me: a woman named Reyhan who was known for her horsemanship and organizing prowess. Reyhan trained women to ride in secret as a revolutionary act. She lived and worked in Kordan, the same suburb that hosted hungry lovers and provided refuge to city dwellers growing tired of the constant mayhem of the capital. I made my way to Reyhan's barn the very next day.

A group of women was gathered under an olive tree. They were cleaning and polishing saddles and weaving ropes that I would later learn doubled as reins. None of them wore headscarves or the Islamically mandated outerwear of long, drape-like coats called *monteaus*. Like the male jockeys I had seen the few times I had attended horse races in the United States, these women wore tight pants called jodhpurs, boots, and T-shirts or tank tops.

One of the taller women, who had a brownish-red pixie cut, came toward me. "I'm Laleh," she said, kissing me on both cheeks. "You must be the American." I stiffened. I hated this reference. I had come to Iran in search of belonging, a way to make sense of who I was and where I came from. But my ac-

cent and manners gave me away. Too Iranian in America, too American in Iran.

Laleh introduced me to the three other women gathered in the shade of the branches. My eyes lingered on their faces as I searched for signs of the woman from the other day. I wondered if I'd be able to muster the courage to ask these women if they knew her.

"Come, let's introduce you to Reyhan," Laleh said. She took my hand and guided me toward a small mud house with an even smaller doorway. The cracking walls had been painted a cheerful yellow, and the doorway was framed with turquoise and yellow tiles. I kicked off my shoes and bent my head to follow Laleh inside. The house was comparatively cooler than the scorching summer heat, the cool floor tiles bringing down our body temperatures. The smell of grass mixed with hay, dirt, and horsehair filled my nostrils. I would come to associate this somewhat startling smell with comfort and happiness, the heartbeat of the horses immediately lowering my own.

But Reyhan was nowhere to be found in the house. Laleh offered to take me back to the paddocks and introduce me to some of the horses instead. Butterflies danced inside me. I would finally be close enough to these magnificent creatures to touch them, to inhale them.

"Are you nervous?" Laleh asked. Her emerald-green eyes flickered mischievously.

"I'm excited. I can't wait to get on one." That heady mixture of fear-induced adrenaline and passion coursed through my veins.

Laleh nodded and ran her long, delicate fingers through her cropped hair. "It's even better than you think." She smiled.

As we walked into a grassy area framed by splintering wooden fences, five horses began to wander toward us. They drifted slowly, their heads swaying to the rhythm of their own feet. As they drew closer my eyes floated up to lock with theirs, fixated on their long, silky eyelashes. I stepped back instinctively, suddenly acutely aware of our size difference.

“Don’t be afraid. They are gentle giants,” Laleh assured me.

“It’s just . . . I’m just realizing that they . . . kind of scare the shit out of me,” I replied as three horses encircled me.

“Well, the only way is to face your fear.”

“Face it or harness it?” I raised my eyebrows.

“You can’t exactly harness fear. You can learn to recognize it, to use it, like you do with rage. But either way you must face it. Now, up you go.” Laleh looped the red-and-white woven ropes in her hands expertly around the head of a chestnut-colored horse with a black mane. The horse lowered its head with care and bowed its front legs to make her job easier. She gently fingered the mane out of the way of her work, then rubbed the horse between its ears. After securing the reins, Laleh knelt on one knee between the horse and me. She looked at me expectantly.

My eyes widened.

“Sorry, am I supposed to just sit on her back like that?” I asked nervously.

“First, it’s a ‘he,’ and his name is Jahangir. We call him Jahan.”

I smiled. His name meant “the world.”

“And second, if you can’t or don’t want to ride him without a saddle—like a real woman—I’ll go fetch you something.” Laleh stood, towering over me once again, and walked back to the yellow mud house. I watched her walk away and then whipped my head back to Jahan, realizing in that moment that we were



alone and I was way out of my league. What if the horse ran away? What if he tried to run me over? But Jahan just stood there calmly licking his lips and bobbing his head as he looked at me expectantly. I hesitantly touched his nose, causing him to lower his head. I rubbed between his ears as I had watched Laleh do moments earlier. As I did so, Jahan's entire body relaxed, and I realized that mine had as well. Just then, my new friend returned with dust-coated blankets and a scarf. Jahan stiffened at the sight of what she carried. He jerked his head up toward the sky. Unaccustomed to horse movements, I startled, lost my footing on the ground, and fell to my hands and knees. I stood quickly, dusting my body—and ego—off. Before I had the chance to ponder whether there would also be a saddle, Laleh had fastened the blankets atop Jahan's back, divided like butterfly wings by the scarf she tied around his belly. He shook his mane, as if to roll his eyes at me.

"No more excuses, up you go." Laleh knelt beside me again, and this time I stepped gingerly on her upper quadriceps, and my belly flopped onto Jahan's back clumsily. Laleh clutched her midsection as her laugh echoed across the farm. Before long, two other women were making their way toward us.

I scrambled as quickly as I could, bruised ribs and ego be damned, and flung my left leg over Jahan's back to come to a straddling sit between the fabric. I gripped the reins tightly, ready to hold on and gallop away into the sunset.

But Jahan stood motionless, chewing lazily on some weeds. Now there were three women laughing at me. My face flushed.

"So, you mounted the American, I see." One of the women chuckled. She looked older than the others, perhaps in her mid-thirties. Her tanned face and chapped lips matched the color

of her hair. Her black eyes and eyebrows stood out against the beige canvas of her skin.

"I'm Reyhan," she said. She walked up to Jahan and raised her hand ever so slightly. He obediently lowered his head and front legs, catapulting me forward. As my face landed in his tangled black mane, I couldn't help but laugh at myself. I used my hands to push myself back up to a seat as he rose. My horse's sense of humor was contagious.

"It's . . . ah . . . I'm Pardis." I cleared my throat. "It's nice to meet you."

"I've heard a lot about you," Reyhan replied. She wandered over to a white horse I hadn't noticed. She made the slightest kissing sound with her lips, and the horse walked calmly over to her and bowed. She mounted him effortlessly and then smiled. "You're the sex doctor."

Everyone laughed again.

"*Studying* sex as politics," I corrected her, as gently as I could. I was embarrassed and knew my defenses were rising. But even just sitting on a horse had brought me an enormous sense of calm, one that I wanted to bottle up and store for all the times of uncertainty that raged inside my divided self. That unending quest for conscious self-actualization had led me to my ancestral homeland in search of answers and reassurance.

"So, you're a feminist then?" Laleh asked. I was grateful to be sitting on a horse so I wouldn't have to look up at her. She squinted at me, lifting her left hand to form a canopy over her face for shade.

"It doesn't matter what or who she is," Reyhan interjected. "Right now, she is a rider and nothing more." Reyhan clucked her tongue, and the white horse began an elegant prance-like

jog around the arena. He tossed his mane triumphantly as he carried his rider proudly around the arena. In that moment I was torn between wanting to be the horse and wanting to be the rider. I shook my head and then tried to make the same clucking noise with my tongue, but Jahan remained rooted to the ground.

“You have to squeeze your legs when you cluck!” Reyhan called out from the other side of the arena.

My heart was pounding against my rib cage. I did not want to embarrass myself. Did not want to fall. Did not want to fail. Fear threatened to undo me, but then I felt Jahan inhale calmly, expanding his rib cage between my legs, and my blood pressure dropped.

I squeezed with the full force of my underdeveloped thigh muscles. Jahan reluctantly began walking slowly toward the outer edge of the arena. As he lunged forward, my heart leaped and a lightness came over me. I knew I didn’t look anything like Reyhan in her marvelous elegance trotting perfectly around the arena, but even this walking slowly, clumsily seated amid scarf-spliced pillows, was exhilarating.

“Nice walk!” Laleh called, interrupting my reverie. She had her arm looped around the waist of the other young woman, whose name I would later learn was Vida, and they were laughing again.

My heart skipped as I looked from Reyhan to Laleh and Vida.

Reyhan’s horse picked up speed from a canter to a gallop. I watched as she dropped the reins and leaned back ever so slightly to allow her hips to fuse with her horse’s body. She closed her eyes and turned her palms up to the sky, the picture of surrendering to a feeling of ecstasy. She did a few turns

around the arena as Laleh, Vida, and I stared. Something inside me stirred—the joy of surrender, I wondered?

“Fly, Reyhan, fly,” Laleh called.

Reyhan opened her eyes, leaned forward to grab a fistful of the horse’s mane, and then winked at me before disappearing into the trees. I dug my heels into Jahan’s sides, determined to follow. But Jahan only picked up the slightest bit of speed, moving from the walk to a slow, jostling trot. I wondered if I’d be bounced off his back. I gripped the reins tighter and squeezed harder. But the death grip of my legs was the signal for speed, I quickly learned. Jahan was trotting faster and faster, and my heart leaped into my throat. I closed my eyes—an instinct that I would learn to fight—and then forced myself to open them. Suddenly, there was Laleh. She had jumped in front of us.

“Ist!” she said, holding up her hand. Jahan stopped in an instant.

“You can’t leave the arena until you can ride,” Vida tsked. Laleh shook her head and started stroking Jahan’s face to calm him.

“I can ride,” I said defiantly. I knew it was dangerous, but that only increased my hunger. I needed to fly.

“If you’re serious about it, come back tomorrow, and then the next day and the next,” Laleh said. “I’ll teach you.”

“You will?” Every part of me was igniting. I didn’t know what I wanted more, to be back on a horse or to win her approval.

“Yes, you know why? Because you’re a feminist.” She winked.

I returned the next day bursting with excitement. Reyhan was nowhere to be found, nor were the other women I had seen the day before—except for Laleh. As she saddled up a different horse, this one a brownish-reddish color I would learn was

referred to as “sorrel,” Laleh explained that the others were out on a trail ride—or *dasht* as she called it—honing skills she would teach me in time.

We rode in the arena all morning until the noontime sun beat down on our backs. This horse, whose name was Ostad (or “professor”), was like riding in a Cadillac. Even when he trotted, I wasn’t jostled. Instead, I floated on a cloud, watching the horizon rise and fall as we rode. Ostad’s instincts were impeccable. He knew to begin at a slow pace and then to quicken just so. He picked up the gait, and my heart fluttered. Ostad transitioned from pace to pace effortlessly, slowing and then quickening on the turns and zigzags we took around the farm. Even when I lost my bearings, Ostad remained steady. When I forgot to dig my right heel into his ribs to tell him to turn left, he still turned left to avoid the obstacle course that Laleh and Vida had laid out for me. And it seemed that all I had to do was think a command in my head and Ostad followed it before my body even had a chance to signal, squeeze for speed, or kick for direction.

I returned every day for a week straight. On the seventh day, as I was packing my bag before the sun rose, my aunt stopped me.

“Have you shifted to horses then? No more sexual revolution?” she asked, her perfectly tattooed black eyebrows raised.

“This is just something I have to do for me, *khaleh*. I have a feeling these women might be a different piece of the same puzzle.”

My aunt sighed. By this point she had stopped questioning my whereabouts after a series of awkward midnight encounters the summer before when she caught me sneaking back into her apartment—twice with a young man in tow. We agreed that

summer on a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy that would keep her out of trouble with my parents—and the authorities, should it come to that. And it would keep me free from having to divulge details I wasn’t ready to speak aloud quite yet to a family member. But she remained curious about my work. A self-proclaimed feminist who never married, she spent many evenings reading my field notes and helping me think through the sexual revolution unfolding before my very eyes on the streets of Iran.

That morning, as I bumped my tiny Toyota Yaris along the dirt road leading to the horse farm, I decided two things: first, I was ready to leave the arena for the hills, and second, while we rode, I was determined to ask Laleh about her feminism. With each successful lap around the outdoor arena, I felt a developing trust between us. Laleh watched me closely. Occasionally, she would ask about my research, but when I returned the questioning, she would gallop away on her stallion, throwing a mischievous smile across her shoulder.

“I’m ready, Laleh. Today is the day,” I announced. She was grooming Ostad out in the pasture. They both turned their heads at the sound of my voice. Ostad followed Laleh obediently as she walked toward me.

“Ha! That’s funny. I don’t think you’re ready,” she replied. She shook her head as she drew closer to me. I had to tilt my head to meet her gaze. I wished I was a foot taller or mounted on a horse.

“I *am* ready, dear friend. You have taught me to—”

“There is a whole world of danger out there,” she interjected. “You have to be ready for anything.”

“Laleh, I am in Iran researching probably the most dangerous topic of all time—sex. I *am* ready for anything. I’m going

to ride out there.” I pointed toward the trees at the edge of the farm, which led to the mountains. “With or without you.” It would take almost two decades for me to realize how much this combination of unexamined fear and draw of danger was wearing on my soul, preventing me even from surrendering to my new passion—riding.

Laleh dug her hands into her hair and shot me an exasperated look.

“Fine. Let’s ride.”

I didn’t have time to wonder if my jaw was broken. The revving of motorbikes had come out of nowhere, shaking my skin from my bones, and it was instinct that pulled my head down just as my horse flung his back. The full force of Ostad’s head collided with my face. *Crack*. I turned my head, wincing.

More revving. Ostad let out a loud neigh and reared up on his hind legs, ready for battle. And then the mountain I had been staring at with fierce determination was upside down. Ostad had bucked and I had fallen, but I continued to hold on to his red-and-white woven snaffle.

“Let go!” Laleh shouted, straining to be heard over the brigade of motorbikes. I hadn’t seen them, hadn’t sensed them coming, nor could I find them now that I was belly up to the sky. I hadn’t listened to Laleh. I was still holding the reins as Ostad galloped away. He was dragging me, my back scraping against the rocky soil.

I tried to turn and jackknife my body to pull us both to a halt. But I wasn’t a strong enough rider and only succeeded in bellyflopping into the ground. My twisting gave Ostad the

slack he needed, and he broke free of my grip. I looked up to see his dark mane blowing in the wind, his tail swishing, as he galloped away leaving a trail of dust behind him.

I had been flying. Only moments before it had been *my* black hair in the wind as we rode up the mountain together. My legs had encircled Ostad's perfectly formed belly, his brown-red fur melting into my heels. When Ostad tossed his mane, I did the same. Now dirt coated the inside of my mouth. Jammed in the crevices of my teeth were flecks of the smooth sandstone rock I had fallen in love with on my first trip into the mountains just a few months earlier. I lay flat on my back, not moving. I moved my tongue first to the right then to the left, and, neither direction felt like a good idea. My jaw might well be broken. I tried to spit, failed, and lay back down.

If I could have remained forever lying in that field, my bleeding scalp irrigating the wildflowers that sprung up at the base of Mount Damavand, I would have. I wanted to close my eyes, to feel the sun kiss my cheeks, to inhale the intoxicating scent of lavender and the aromatic dirt that I hungered for whenever I was in the city. But the roar of revving engines pulverized my peace, and my eyes met Laleh's. She was still on her shimmering black stallion, Felfel. Her horse was the picture of calm. She squeezed gently with only the tips of her fingers, and he came to a halt.

"Pardis! Get up, now!" Laleh was less calm. Her brownish-red hair started peeking out from the headscarf she had clearly tried to quickly yank back up when the bikers arrived. Her face was flushed. She looked over her shoulder.

I managed to push myself up onto my elbows, and that was when I finally saw them. Five bearded men on motorcycles rid-



ing in a V formation. The man at the front wore aviator glasses and a green cloth tied around his neck. The others wore a green cloth tied around their heads. I would later learn that this was a sign of Shia would-be martyrs. I scanned the horizon for Reyhan. But when I heard her voice, it came from behind me.

“They’re Revolutionary Guards. We gotta go!” Reyhan called out. It was as if she had materialized out of thin air. Laleh and I had been riding for two hours, trying to catch up to her and the others with no luck, and yet now here she was, just in time to see my *spectacular* failure. I heard the familiar drumming of Ostad’s hooves, and I spun around. Reyhan, atop her glowing white mare, Tala, was pounding toward me, the red-and-white woven reins in her hand. She had managed to corral Ostad and was leading him by the muzzle as she galloped toward the spot where Laleh and her horse had me encircled.

I tried to stand but my body betrayed me; it was not yet ready to get back on the horse.

“We don’t have time, Pardis. Get up and get on!” Reyhan screamed. Her perfectly rounded lips were pulled back to highlight the fang-like shape of her upper molars. My body stayed firmly rooted to the soil.

“I told you that you need to learn to walk before you can run,” Laleh tsked. “But you insisted you were ready, insisted you wanted to go for a *dasht* up in the hills. Now prove to me you can do it. Get up and be the Persian warrior woman you are.”

Her words sent a jolt through my body. *Persian warrior woman*. Gordafarid, the Persian warrior princess, had inspired me to climb onto a horse in the first place. Laleh’s eyes burned into mine. A mix of anger, desperation, and terror locked us together.

I didn't know what hurt more—my jaw, my ribs, or my ego. Just moments earlier I had felt so confident, so free, so much at *home* riding through the hills of my native homeland on a horse who seemed to understand me better than any human ever had. But I had been caught up in the idea of my riding, in picturing what I must have looked like to Laleh, in thinking about the stories I would tell my friends and family back home about how I found belonging inside of equine adrenaline as I careened through the mountains and valleys of Iran. I was so fixated on my past and future that I hadn't focused on the present and had disconnected from Ostad, who had no doubt tried to warn me with his quickening pace.

"Are you a feminist warrior or are you afraid?" she screamed.

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