

Following a Mirage

By Larissa Sprecher

“Whoa,” my companion’s stallion halted at the word.
“Is something wrong?” I wondered what I’d missed.

My companion was studying her handsome Arabian Debonnaire. He was alert and his nostrils flared as he tested the air. His neck arched proudly as he gave a blasting neigh. Frowning, she stroked him distractedly and studied the barren landscape. “There’s another stallion in the area, and it’s not a racer.”

Before I could speak Debonnaire’s challenge was answered. The scream made me tingle; it was a bugle, musical and resonant, with a wild, lonely note. Clear and distant, the pitch rose to a piercing height before dying away to be lost in the moan of the wind. “A wild stallion perhaps?” I hopefully scrutinized the shifting sand dunes.

“I don’t know, let’s keep going,” she said with a hint of nervousness as Debonnaire started moving again. Concentrating on the trail, she didn’t notice what my eyes were fixed on. To the right and ahead of us, a streamer of dust was being raised behind some small, quickly moving object. It bent nearer and nearer and because evening was just falling I was puzzled that the source could not be discerned. When it disappeared on the other side of a large sand dune my curiosity got the better of me. Saying nothing to my friend, I turned off the trail and dismounted below the crest of the dune. Then, dropping the reins of my mare Desert Dancer, I crawled to the top.

At first I was mystified for nothing seemed to be there. I blinked, then through the swirling sand caught a glimpse of something. Blinking again I stared hard and saw not the black stallion I had been hoping for, but an Arabian nearly the color of the sand. Actually, he was a gorgeous, rare rose-grey; a dappled grey with a dusky, rose hue and a wafting silver mane and tail. That moment I named him Sarab, Arabic for Mirage, because he scarce seemed more.

My eyes were hurting from staring so hard, so I blinked and rubbed them, but when I looked again the stallion was gone, leaving only a swirl of sand where he had stood. Now I wasn’t sure if I had seen anything at all, perhaps it had merely been a trick of my eyes. But the desolate scream still echoed inside my head; mirages didn’t make that kind of sound. I distractedly remounted and started moving again, but vowed that I would come back. In my heart I believed Sarab was real, but if he was only a mirage he was well worth seeing twice.

But time has a way of vanishing when you want it most, and it was not until

the same race a year later that I was able to return to the desert where I saw Sarab. The ride passed without my seeing a sign of the horse; but near the end, as evening fell again, my ear caught the last, fading notes of a wild bugle, carried on the wind from afar. That was enough to bring me back the next year, and for many years following. Sometimes I would hear the lonely call I knew was Sarab's; sometimes I would see and hear nothing. I saw him only once again, and that was at evening as my eye followed the trail of dust against the warm sky and briefly picked out the rosy vision of a horse from the swirling sand.

I asked the locals, but all except one knew nothing of such a horse. The exception was a wizened old man who only looked at me with a secretive, knowing smile and murmured, "You have seen Sarab."

Wide eyed I asked, "What is he then?"

"That is for you to decide," was all the answer I could get out of him. He added one word of advice, "Do not look for him, he cannot be found." Resigning myself to the fact that I would never know what it was— a mirage or an Arabian stallion named Sarab— I was still more mystified than ever. But not quite mesmerized enough to go out into the barren sands searching for a horse I would not find. That is until the year I got lost.

It was somewhere between the last vet check and the finish line; a section of trail I had traveled many times in the evening, even the dark, and how I got lost is still a mystery. But lost I was on a stretch of open sand that was the same as far as I could see. I stayed that way all that cold, lonely night, and all the next blistering, endless day. By that time Desert Dancer was only slowly walking and I was in no better shape; all of my water gone because I had thought myself so close to the finish.

The hot sun was finally sinking as I staggered along with my mare. My foot caught on something and I sprawled in the sand, exhausted, and didn't bother to get back up. It must have been several hours later, for I felt the whisper of a cool breeze, when I was awakened by a soft, warm breath on my cheek. Dancer nudged me and tossed her head meaningfully. I looked up and caught my breath as I saw, not twenty feet away, Sarab himself. He stood ever like a mirage in a swirl of sand that softened his outline and made him seem to appear and disappear. I blinked once and he was gone, again and his rose-grey form was once more before me— dark, mysterious eyes beckoning me.

Believing it was a dream, I crawled back onto my mare, who, like a true Arabian, seemed somewhat revived simply by breathing the cool wind. Sarab flicked his silver tail and vanished, reappearing at three times the distance from me. Dancer trotted after him. I followed a mirage, still not sure if my eyes were truly seeing as the horse wavered, was gone then there like a vision. Sarab ever floated just far enough in front of me so that I

could never be sure of him. The moon intermittently revealed his form as I followed him through the night back to the trail.

Dancer knew her way from there and the first rays of dawn were just breaking as she took me over the finish line. As far as I knew, nobody but myself and the old man– whom I couldn't find again– ever saw this Sarab. They would smile and say, "Only a mirage, quite normal." But I knew they were wrong. Though I never saw Sarab again up close, when I ride the race, I can still hear him scream, and at evening I will sometimes see a plume of dust, and the far off mirage of a horse that blends into the dunes. There is a rose-grey stallion in that desert that can be seen at evening through a swirl of sand. He is to most a mystery, a desert mirage. But I followed that Mirage, his name is Sarab, and once he saved my life.

The End