



Flying on Horseback in Jamaica

By Barbara McNally

In *Unbridled: A Memoir*, Barbara McNally chronicles her journey from stifled, dependent housewife to independent, joyous and authentic living. She starts by tracing her roots in Ireland, and when her ex-husband gets remarried and goes on his honeymoon, Barbara decides to take a solo vacation to Hedonism, a clothing-optional resort in Jamaica. On her way to the beach to ride horses, her taxi breaks down in front of an orphanage for abused teenage girls. She decides to stay overnight to learn more about these girls, and how she can help, which ultimately leads Barbara to create her foundation, Mother Lover Fighter Sage, which fundraises to fight sex trafficking. While staying with the girls, she treats them to a horseback ride—a first for most of them.

Although I'd only met the girls the day before and didn't know them very well, I knew horses. They were loyal, sociable, and eminently

capable. A horse would keep a secret, no matter how awful it was. I could only imagine a fraction of what these girls had been through, but by introducing them to horses, I was sharing what I considered to be a little bit of heaven on earth. On a more tangible level, I thought that if I could help them overcome their fear of horses, perhaps they could overcome other obstacles on their own.

Once we had all mounted up, we rode single file down a path through the trees. The dense forest was cool, even in the heat of the afternoon. Palm fronds rustled in the breeze, and soft ferns uncurled on the damp jungle floor. We passed waterfalls that splashed across the trail, and I watched many of the girls reach out to run their fingers through the gushing water, delighted by the cool splatter against their hands. I encouraged Monique to do the same, and as her hand made contact with the water, she

giggled and pulled it back.

"Go ahead, try it again," I said, reining my horse to a stop.

She shot her hand back into the waterfall and let the cool cascade sluice through her fingers.

"That feels good," she said, smiling though missing teeth.

I grinned at her. We caught up with the rest of the group and headed toward the beach. When we arrived, we all dismounted. Several of the girls had flung their shoes into the wet sand as they ran straight for the water, fully clothed, with dreadlocks flying behind them like flags in the wind.

The water slid off their bodies, and their skin glistened in the sun. I was surprised to discover that, even though these girls had been raised on an island, many of them didn't know how to swim. They waded into the surf and splashed each other

with the salty froth, playing with the abandon of youth. Some dolphins cruised by, and a few of the swimmers imitated their easy sail through the water. For several hours, the girls bounced about in the water, their cares and worries temporarily forgotten.

I thought of how these free-spirited girls were more appreciative than many women I knew back in the States, who took their blessings for granted yet were trapped by fear and inertia within their own mental prisons. These girls were real victims, and they put things in perspective for me.

Naomi lobbed a clump of white sand at an unsuspecting Marsha, who gave chase. Monique stood nearby, watching the action on the beach with a huge smile on her face. Shading my eyes with my hands, I looked back toward the shore and saw the van from the stable emerge on a gravel road that had been

hidden by the trees. Shamara got out and gathered up our lunch supplies. She huffed her way across the sand, juggling her load. When she neared the rest of the group, she propped up a striped umbrella and settled into a beach chair.

I stood next to my horse near one of the guides. He was a Rasta, and he seemed to be enjoying the day.

"They're having so much fun," I said, watching the circus of activities.

"It be very nice. What you're doing for them." His well-worn chaps hung low on his hips, and he held a strand of grass between his teeth.

"They've given me so much more than what I have given them." It sounded corny when I said it out loud, but it was true.

"Ya, but it still be very nice. Maybe I show you something." He started to unbuckle his chaps.

"Have you ever flown before?"

"Only on an airplane. What about you?" I couldn't tell if he was flirting with me, stoned out of his mind, or both.

"When Jah is within, all things are possible."

"Show me," I said, accepting the challenge.

The guide shed his chaps and mounted his horse. Following his lead, I put a foot in my stirrup and climbed astride my horse, ready to be enlightened by a Rasta wrangler. With a flick of his reins, the guide let out a shout. "Irie!"

Together, our horses galloped toward the sea. I waited for the guide to change direction, but he headed straight into the surf. As the waves broke around us, the horses surged forward, part running, part swimming, and the Rasta was right. It felt just like flying. For a moment, I was Pegasus.

The girls on the shore shouted and cheered, clamoring to take a turn. I looked to Shamara for approval, and she nodded with a smile. They traveled in pairs, each guide escorting a willing girl into the froth. I could hear shrieks of joy and laughter when their horses took "flight," galloping through the waves.

Not every girl was brave enough to fly. Monique hung back from the others.

"Do you want to try?" I could understand her trepidation. Monique chewed her bottom lip and looked from me to the other girls and back again. "Yes, ma'am. I want to try, but I'm scared."

I took both of our horses and led them toward the water, tying Monique's horse to a large piece of driftwood on the beach. Eager to experience the rush again, I got on my horse and demonstrated for Monique before I took her into the water.

"It's really quite easy." I dismounted when I returned to shore. "You don't have to do anything except trust your horse."

Emboldened, she came over to the horse. I gave her a leg up, and she hopped astride. Her small hands gripped the reins and clenched the saddle horn. Taking hold of the lead rope tied to her horse's halter, I mounted my own horse, leaving a slack loop between us. I started toward the water and looked back as Monique closed her eyes. Her well-trained mare followed mine out into the water. As we ventured a little deeper, the horses lifted off the ocean floor, buoyed by the salt water.

Monique flicked her eyes open and looked down into the frothy water. "We're flying, Miss Barbara! We're flying!"

She laughed and tentatively lifted one hand off the saddle horn just long enough to wave. I waved back. By the time we returned to shore, I was so hungry my stomach could have eaten itself. I hadn't realized how much energy it took to supervise a group of inexperienced girls, especially those starved for attention.

Shamara had spread out the sandwiches and salads we'd brought along, and we all picnicked on the beach. After lunch, the girls and I built elaborate sand castles, bolstered by turrets and surrounded by moats. Shamara had the misfortune of falling asleep in the sun, and some of the girls buried her arms in the sand. When she woke, Shamara pretended to be annoyed but couldn't help but laugh. With my permission, Monique used my camera to capture our day on the beach. I knew the girls had Internet access through the school's computer, so I promised to share the photos with them online.

Salty streaks of ocean water dried on the girls' dark skin and turned their arms and legs an ashen gray. On the ride back to Windsor, the girls chattered incessantly about their "magic day." By the time we arrived at the gate, the sun had started its plunge below the horizon and gentle gusts of evening wind moved over the island.

Barbara McNally is the founder of Mother Lover Fighter Sage, a foundation dedicated to providing women with opportunities for growth and self-discovery, and the author of *Unbridled: A Memoir*. To learn more, visit her website at: UnbridledFreedom.com.

