
KUDA TERBANG MARIA PINTO
(THE FLYING HORSE OF
MARIA PINTO)

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Approaching dusk, Yosef Legiman saw Maria Pinto cross the seas on a flying horse. The winds suddenly rose up and whipped and hissed. The air turned into strange mantras in a tongue spoken only by witches; fragrant, drugging everything that moved and had a skull. He crouched, gazed upwards, hugged the long-nosed automatic weapon close, and remembered his commander's words, "Let her pass, don't shoot."

Maria Pinto's soft gown scattered the stench of warfare with its blindingly white folds of cloth. Two guards were present for this routine journey, guarding their quarry from the roof of the train. Yosef let the procession in the sky go by. His knees were weak. He sat on the ground.

The winds calmed. The tall and luxuriant grasses, the thorn bushes covering the baked earth, the steep stone cliffs in the distance all came back to crowd his vision along with his thoughts of the girl.

The first time Yosef heard Maria's story was from a friend who had been sent ahead of him to the island, "That's why we haven't won, because those rebels have a protector. A girl to boot. Huh! Really pisses me off."

In the beginning Maria Pinto had been an ordinary girl, had even enrolled in the literature department of a prestigious university in Jakarta before dropping out after

three semesters, returning to the land of oranges and coffee.¹ The inhabitants of said country had been condemned to die, disappear, commit suicide, become insane, or enter the forest to be at one with the wild hogs and deer. A crisis had half swallowed her homeland when Maria was recalled home by the chieftains to fulfill her destiny. The shamans of her tribe anointed Maria the supreme commander,² arming her with the weapons of ancient sorcery and a flying horse, for she was the chosen one revealed by the sacred whispers of the ancestors. Ever since then, Maria Pinto was the leader of a dangerous and amorphous troop, a force that could surround the enemy in every zone, shrink the guts of those who believed in objective facts; those people who spat on fairytales and dreams.

“When the fog came, rolling over the battlefield, our troops perished, dying one by one from gunshot wounds. One day, the fog came again, rolling overhead above us, and I shot it without stopping. When the fog vanished, I witnessed seven dead on the ground. This country is really something,” said his friend, smiling bitterly.

Now Yosef was caged in a train that rolled into the night, failing to shutter his eyes. His drowsiness had disappeared, replaced by a feeling of anger. The train seemed to be floating in the dark. The dots of light emitted by the villages looked like orderly rows of fireflies in the window. Yet, the rest of the landscape was a dense darkness. Next to him sat a young girl engrossed in a Stephen King novel—or so said the name on the book cover—and once in a while she smiled or made a sound of surprise at Yosef’s tales.

“But, I never shot Maria Pinto and her flying horse, never, ... she is so powerful, it’d be pointless,” Yosef said slowly, almost in a murmur.

The young woman was curious for a moment, and then went back to studying the pages of her book. In the beginning she had not been keen to listen to the rambling of the whiny soldier next to her. It was weird watching this sharpshooter believe in things that were so far from the laws of reality and sound judgment. But when she stared at the soldier’s face, she was startled. Perhaps this was the face of a person who lived and died by war.

His face resembled a child’s rag doll—even though torn and disfigured, it was too beloved to be thrown in the trash; a face full of the scars of previous stitches. He had a pair of melancholy eyes adorned with slash marks near the brow, looking like the embroidery of a careless beginner attempting a climbing-vine pattern.

“This morning my mother cried again. This was my last leave before going back on duty. My mother is traumatized. Poor mother. But, this is my choice,” Yosef explained, staring straight ahead.

¹ Here, the “land of oranges and coffee” refers to East Timor, where its dry climate was best known for producing those two crops. The description in the rest of the passage also supports this theory—a country torn in half, under siege, with its population dying.

² The Indonesian word is “*panglima*,” a decidedly military term that emphasizes the ongoing war between Maria Pinto’s people and the soldiers on the other side.

Six months ago his brother had died of torture at the hands of the rebels. His brother's corpse had been sent back without a heart, intestines, or his genitals, locked tightly into a mahogany-wood coffin. Now Yosef was the only remaining son in the family.

"His coffin was draped with a huge flag, a really enormous one!" A note of pride mixed with grief.

The young woman shivered. How desolate was a body with a gaping cavity!

"We are a family of farmers, poor. How nice for you to go to university, and to have money to travel. It's hard enough for us just to eat. Becoming soldiers made us feel respected. The other villagers were more careful with us." This time he looked into the face of his neighbor, who had burrowed back into her book.

He felt relieved to be able to share his pathetic and cowardly stories with the young woman. Just like in those nauseating clichés spawned by romance novels, he felt calm by her side, this stranger he had just met on the road. Was this a sign that he was preparing himself to stare death in the face, that he then had to make a confession of his sins, and to feel everything strongly? Ah, the whispers of death had not yet come in full.

The train pierced into the interior, crossing seas, salt fields, teak forests, plantations, rice fields, and settlements. The beacons of light flashed and drowned in the field of the windowpane. Another certainty came, turning its sharp pains into the pit of the stomach.

"I really loved my lover. But this afternoon, I was brought down. Her family did not agree to our relationship. Her brothers threatened to cause an accident if we went ahead. One of her uncles is very close to those in power. Maybe my wages are too small and her family is worried by my lifestyle. Maybe ..." he went on, softly.

He produced a brownie from a lunchbox and began to chew slowly. The aisle of the train car was empty. Tired bodies slept in faded blue cotton blankets. A soft snore erupted in intervals from a nearby row, the playful joke a grandfather was playing with his grandchild.

"Yes, maybe my assignment should be put on hold. Anyway, my problems are making me unfocused and lazy. Someone who has personal problems usually doesn't get called to the front, they could get killed because of a stupid mishap."

Suddenly a gust of wind hurtled through the corridor. He was intimate with the wind, absorbing its rustling sounds that were sharp or lilting, reading the signs that had been sent.

"Go on, come and feel this wind," he whispered, touching the shoulder of the young woman.

"This isn't wind, it's cold air from the air-conditioning," she countered.

"If we were in the wrong position, the enemy would catch our scent. Our presence would easily be detected." He began to fret.

He was always on the look out. Only once had he slipped, and the consequences had been humiliating.

One night Yosef was separated from his platoon after a crossfire skirmish with an enemy group. He walked alone, following the river by starlight, looking for the nearest village. No village appeared, but only an isolated little hut at the edge of the forest. Yosef tried to eavesdrop on the conversation that was perhaps going on between the residents of the hut. His nerves and his patience battled it out. The sound of the crickets' wings grew, vibrating into the stillness.

Yosef dared himself to push the door open with his rifle's nose, while preparing to pull the trigger in case of danger. The hut was pitch-black. He lit a match. The view that materialized made his heart squeak.

A girl was lying on the floor of the hut, hugging a wooden winged horse, a child's toy. His throat felt strangled. He came closer, angling his rifle at the face of the sleeping girl. Drops of cold sweat began to rise to the pores of his tired body. The lighting of the match had made Maria Pinto stir, looking at him gently and silently. The great commander and the soldier were alone, face-to-face. Maria Pinto rose slowly, moving her hand into the air ... and thousands of fireflies clustered to light up the hut, dancing and flitting about.

Maria Pinto removed her white fairy-gown. Her naked body seemed to be made of wax, like the statues of the saints, changing into a transparent film. He could see the heart, intestines, lungs, and skull bones of the girl quite clearly. The beautiful and delicate head grew enlarged, with bulging pupils and a wrinkled mien. He had a fleeting thought about a film he had watched in the barracks, about alien creatures from outer space.

The next day, when the dew was still glimmering on the stalks of the field grass, he was lying on his face at the door of the nearest security post. His friends ran to him, looking at him strangely. He scrambled up to inspect the earth around him, without saying a word. Confused and slightly spooked, his friends thought he had amnesia. Yosef had been missing for days.

No footprints from my boots on this soft earth, he thought. Perhaps the supreme commander had brought him on her wooden flying horse after seeing this fool soldier faint in front of her? Why hadn't Maria Pinto killed him? Why had he been so foolish and not stuck his rifle into that girl's temple?

He began to laugh, louder and louder. Wooden horse, wooden horse, wooden horse, wooden horse ... Yosef chanted those words like a mantra. His skinny stomach was hit by a great wave, roiled by an uncontrollable hilarity. The doctor said that he was deeply depressed, and pressed the troop commander to send him to a peace zone for rest. But it was impossible to fund a truly peaceful zone in a war. He was immediately sent home. His recovery was quick, but he was reassigned to another division.

"This is my secret, only between us," Yosef explained, ending his story.

The young woman let out a great sigh. A complicated and tragic love triangle, how sad, she thought. This soldier was caught between his lover and a ghost-general. Both tales had *sad endings*.³

³ "Sad ending" in English in the original.

The train was about to end its journey. The air cooled. People began to busy themselves with straightening their hair, blouse, or wrinkled shirt, and resuming their everyday talk. Two male stewards collected the passengers' blankets in a big black sack, dragging it the length of the corridor.

"Would you like to accompany me tonight?" Yosef looked straight at the girl.

"I want to finish this novel."

"I want to take a walk and clear my head."

"I hope you have a good time."

They parted, becoming strangers once more.

One sunny afternoon, Yosef Legiman climbed the stairs of a skyscraper in the heart of the city, carrying a bag with a gun. He had been watching someone nearly a full month. He hid on the top floor, surveying his surroundings with an infrared mask, and then let the wind attack his body. He felt the flows and gusts of the wind, let the wings of the wind sweep his skin, then determined the right spot to aim from. The slightest mistake in reading the wind could be fatal. Enemies could trace his tracks from his body odor, or from the scent of blood carried by the air particles. However, life and death were the verses that followed each other in *pantun*,⁴ the couplet and content of a poem. He was ready to face them both.

The light blue sky looked quiet. Yosef began to fasten the silencer onto his weapon. The sun shone gently. He went back to watching his target.

The window drapes on the seventh floor of a nearby building were thrown wide open. In it someone was pacing, talking to two friends. The red dot on his lens followed the movement. His pupils focused. He imagined himself as an eagle. Now his target stood with its back to the window. He slowly drew back the trigger, toward the red dot in the middle of the circle, striking.

The window glass shattered in the building across. Someone fell lifeless to the floor. He had carried out his task. Now he switched on a cellular phone and reported it to his commander.

The first time Yosef had seen the young woman's photograph, he brooded for a long time: the leader of the terrorists. He was reminded of the girl he met on the train a month ago. It has to be her, Yosef thought. Yes, this world is cruel to soldiers. He had killed that girl, vanishing the one life who had kept his secrets.

The wind suddenly blew hard through the window. His body shivered. He saw Maria Pinto crossing the seas with her wooden horse. Why did that girl always follow him no matter where he was? Maria Pinto smiled, holding out her soft white hand. As if spellbound, Yosef reached toward the waiting fingers of the girl. He felt himself flying between the clouds, floating, looking down at the world fading beneath him.

⁴ A traditional Malay poem with rhyming couplets, where poets compete to answer each other in rounds of *pantun*.