

Paper Horse

by Katrina Dessavre

The trouble with paper horses was not how flimsy they were when you were flying them, reins in hand, high enough that falling would mean more than a bruised knee. Folded correctly, paper horses were supposed to be light but aerodynamic, bending to the breeze but not yielding to it.

No, the problem was that they had a mind of their own and not a smart one at that. They would take the wind's slightest suggestion, no matter how decisively you pulled the reins to indicate the direction you wanted them to take.

I discovered all that about a hundred meters above the ocean. My noble, folded steed kept nudging the thin leather reins I had carefully threaded through its papery flesh until we had crossed the froth of the shoreline. We were putting more and more distance between us and the bedroom where I had imagined the flight path to be as uncomplicated and smooth as the story that inspired it.

It was white with a few grey dapples, that horse in the picture, staring placidly at a patch of grass while its rider stared out triumphantly. They were at the top of a cliff, a breeze suggested by the horse's animated mane. Sure, the rider was some kind of knight about twice my size but that didn't deter me from thinking I could ride a horse, too.

But when I went down to stables and asked that prickly, hay-smelling man about whether he had a spare horse, he spit in surprise, all that gummy tobacco mush lodging in his beard. No such things here, he said, at least not ones without the horns on their heads. Horses aren't even that different, I insisted. A horn less, smaller in stature maybe. But the same principle, more or less. He just laughed, saying that he could lend me one of his older unicorns, though I knew that even those would be too proud to let a human ride it. The problem with unicorns these days was that they felt so entitled, so picky about who they let on their backs. They certainly

would never look twice at a four-foot-tall girl with silver ringlets and a candy cane as a walking stick.

So I turned to my stack of thick watercolor papers and resolved to make my own from crisp, clean, precise folds. The tip of my tongue dried up after holding the paper between my teeth for so long, and my room was littered with the corpses of animals just a millimeter off in their folding, but in the end I was reasonably proud of the paper horse in front of me. It was faultless, as far as I could tell. That is until I felt the sun dampen the tiny hairs on the back of my neck as I realized that my beast hadn't inherited the placid demeanor of its two-dimensional counterpart.

I had two options, I reasoned. Panic and topple both of us over, risking the silks I was wearing to weigh me all the way down to the coral reefs.

The other option was to let the horse go where it wanted, tugging back every so often to show some semblance of authority. There was a sandbar about a mile off shore and I was sure I could nudge us to settle there before cajoling it somehow to head back to land.

But the sandbar passed too quickly. I looked back at the bite-sized castle in the distance and the uninterrupted horizon line in front of me and did the only thing I could think of. I tilted the reins ever so slightly upwards, until the wingtips began to darken and curl. By the time the wings were singed stubs, the horse was faltering, dropping little by little, until I could make a clean jump into the water. When I came up for air, paddling furiously to counter the weight of my silks, I caught the last specks of singed paper dissolving on the surface. What must the birds have thought, when they spotted a girl paddling towards the shore, holding on to a candy cane, leather reins between her teeth.

