

"The Old Man and the Thousand Cranes"

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SETTING: A small park surrounded by fortresses of buildings in New York. An ancient tree is situated beside the crossroads of the walking path. An old man is seated on a bench behind a cheap table with a paper sign that says "origami for sale. Lesson also available." There are jars filled with colorful origami figures on the table, as many as they could possibly fit. The rest, cranes, frogs, dogs made with thick card material, are hung on the branches of the tree that loom over the table. A young girl is watching him on the bench across the walking path.

(The GIRL stands up from the bench and walks towards the OLD MAN. She stops in front of the table)

GIRL

Hey Grandpa. Dad's worried about you.

(The OLD MAN doesn't respond and keeps on folding)

GIRL

(sighs and looks around, spotting the paper sign) How much are the lessons?

OLD MAN

(keeps on folding) One dollar for paper. Free lesson.

GIRL

(hands the money to the OLD MAN) Two sheets of paper, please.

The OLD MAN finds two large sheets of paper and hands them to the GIRL. She sits down across him.

GIRL

Do you have any recommendations for beginners?

OLD MAN

(Pointing at the branches of the origami tree) The animals on the low branch are quite easy to fold.

GIRL

(examines the tree) I'll like to try the frog on the far right side.

(The OLD MAN walks to the tree, unhooks the frog, and comes back to the table. After sitting down, he unfolds the frog origami until it is flat. A passerby walks towards the table, taking loud pictures of the origami tree).

PASSERBY

Oh my god, these are so pretty. Did you make these? Are they for sale?

OLD MAN

(without looking up) One dollar. You touch, you take.

PASSERBY

Oh, I only took pictures, so I won't be buying. *(laughs)*

(The PASSERBY walks away, busily uploading the pictures on Instagram).

GIRL

(looks at the passerby walking away before turning back to the old man) Do they usually do that?

OLD MAN

Do what?

GIRL

Like, ask dumb questions. Of course you made these.

OLD MAN

(ignores her question and instead holds up the wrinkled paper)
Where do you think is the starting line?

GIRL

(slight pause) shouldn't I be asking you?

OLD MAN

No. Your frog, so you start.

GIRL

(sighs) fine.

(The GIRL takes the paper from the OLD MAN and stares at it intensely)

GIRL

(running her fingers over a line) This line's the clearest. Is this right?

OLD MAN

The first line does tend to be clearest. People fold it with caution to make it perfect.

GIRL

So is it the first line?

OLD MAN

Most people apply unnecessary force to it too. But I've done this for a long time, and I know it doesn't matter at the end anyway.

(beat)

So no, that wasn't my first line. But it can be yours. Here.

(The OLD MAN folds a couple of times with the wrinkled paper and motions to the GIRL to follow with her own paper. They silently fold for a few seconds.)

GIRL

(looking up from the paper) Hey grandpa, you know our house is always open right? Especially after Grandma...

(The OLD MAN silently folds, no motion indicating that he had heard the GIRL. The girl sighs, and returns back to folding.)

GIRL

(tossing the finished frog in frustration) I copied your exact same motions. Why does mine look so different?

OLD MAN

Does it have to?

GIRL

I mean, there are directions for a reason.

OLD MAN

But yours is a frog, yes? Mine's also a frog. Frogs are all different, and their jumps are all different. See?

(The OLD MAN flips the frog, and it jumps to the end of the table. The girl tries hers too, and the frog leaps far off the table)

OLD MAN

Your frog might be ugly, but it can jump a lot further than mine. Can I see your frog?

(The GIRL picks up the frog on the floor and passes it to the OLD MAN.)

GIRL

(smiling) Hey, I never said my frog was ugly! It's just different. Why do you need my frog?

OLD MAN

(saying it as if it's obvious) To find what made the difference, of course. I'd enjoy having my frogs jumping off the table.

GIRL

What's your favorite origami shape?

OLD MAN

Cranes. Do you know the thousand cranes myth?

GIRL

the thousand cranes myth?

OLD MAN

Fold a thousand cranes, and your wish will come true.

GIRL

A thousand cranes? Wow. I'll probably give up before I reach ten.

(beat)

Have you tried folding a thousand cranes for your wish?

OLD MAN

Yes, every day.

(The GIRL follows the OLD MAN's glance and looks at the jars filled with cranes. The jars all had the phrase "Your wish in a jar" and a \$10 price sticker on it.)

GIRL

But aren't those for sale?

OLD MAN

Yes. I make, and they buy. Since I make it, it's my wish.

GIRL

So people are actually buying your wishes? Your wish's stock value must be high then. *(laughs)* Can I try making one?

(The OLD MAN opens a jar and pulls out an origami crane. He passes it to the GIRL, who this time unfolds the origami on her own.)

GIRL

Can you take things out like that? Shouldn't there be a thousand cranes for a wish?

OLD MAN

The customers never check, and I already made my wish. But I'll fold it back after we're done.

GIRL

What was your wish?

OLD MAN

(nudges at the colorful origami tree) pretty, isn't it?

GIRL

yes it is, but that wasn't my question -

OLD MAN

I used to sit on this bench together.

(Beat)

Are you done looking at the paper?

GIRL

Oh, yes, but -

OLD MAN

(pointing at lines on the paper) Is there anything different about these lines?

GIRL

(reluctantly) Yes, I noticed they're more wrinkled compared to other lines.

OLD MAN

I remember folding this. I was going to fold a giraffe, but I realized the paper size was different, which made folding a giraffe impossible. I almost threw it away and started a new one when I realized I've seen that pattern before. A giraffe's starting patterns are the same as a crane's, you know.

GIRL

(looks up with a look of realization and carefully asks) Do you think that crane would be lonely?

OLD MAN

(looks into her eyes) No. I folded a lot of crane friends for it, about nine hundred and ninety nine of them. *(slightly smiles)*

(The GIRL and the OLD MAN both gaze at the tree fully decorated with origami for a second.)

GIRL

Do you think I'll be able to have an origami tree like that someday?

OLD MAN

Not someday, today. Here, finish your crane.

(The GIRL folds the crane with the guidance of the OLD MAN. When the crane is finished, he cups the two origami cranes and approaches the origami tree. However, instead of hanging them on the tree, he brushes the dust away from a small tree beside the tree. He hangs the two cranes on the small tree.)

OLD MAN

See, you already have two cranes.

GIRL

(laughs) Well, it's still a long way to a thousand. When's our next lesson?

End of Play