

Paper Horses

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The paper animals appeared one day after school. I had gone into the family room to watch television when I noticed something on the windowsill. I looked more closely. It was a horse. I leaned down and touched it on the nose.

“Han-nah.”

I jumped and turned around. My grandmother was standing behind me. She was always sneaking up on me, appearing out of nowhere like a ghost. She grinned and held up another paper figure

“Look,” she said. “A duck.” She handed it to me.

I tried to smile. It wasn't really like a duck at all, some kind of bird, yes, but not a duck. I glanced up. She was still smiling. I didn't know what to say. I liked it better when she'd disappear into the woods behind our house for hours at a time. I never knew what she did out there, though sometimes she brought back odd things: a single blue jay feather, a turtle, a bunch of yellow flowers. My brother and I would smile and nod, and go back to whatever we were doing.

The month before, my father suddenly forbade Nai-nai from going in the woods anymore because, I guessed, the weather was getting colder. She took more naps now too. Not enough, I thought, setting the duck next to the horse.

“Xie xie, Nai-nai,” I said. “Thank you.” I sat on the couch.

She watched me a moment longer, then went away.

Nai-nai had been living with us since the beginning of the summer. Before that she lived in Los Angeles with my father's older sister and her family. “Nai-nai has never been to New Jersey before,” my father told my brother Grant and me, like it was some kind of treat. I had met her only once before, four years ago when I was six and we took a trip out to California. She gave me a jade heart on a dark green string. I knew I was expected to kiss her, but I didn't want to. Her faced was like a piece of paper that had been crumpled up, then smoothed out. My kiss was dry and fast.

I thought of my mother's mother as my real grandmother, my Puo-puo with her smooth, milky skin and her plump fingers squeezed into many gold and jade rings. She laughed loudly, her eyes shut tight, as though she could hardly contain herself. When she visited she'd hold me in her lap and prod the flesh on my arms. I was little chubby, she said, but that was all right since I didn't want to be as skinny as Nai-nai.

Nai-nai was all bones. When she lifted my father's scythe above her head and struck the thick roots of the winter melons in our garden, I thought her arm might break in half. Even in the woods she wore her long, dark blue sheath and black cotton shoes. Before she came to live with us, I had thought only Chinese people in movies wore clothes like that. Her front teeth bucked out so far they came down

over her lips.

“You’d better get braces,” Puo-puo would tease me. “You don’t want teeth like Nai-nai’s.” In bed at night, I pushed my front teeth back with my thumbs.

#

After the horse and duck, more and more paper animals appeared till they covered every table in the family room, the top of the television and the dusty edges of the bookshelves. My father would knock them down when he got a book, and would replace each animal heavily, as though it were made of lead. Sometimes she’d still bring me or Grant a tiger, or a rabbit, or a rat, and we’d thank her, put the new animal on top of the TV with the others, and never look at it again.

Secretly though I wondered about the horse. There was a woman on TV who made paper animals like Nai-nai, and I had seen her make almost everything, except the horse. I couldn’t think of why. One day when my parents weren’t home and Nai-nai was napping, I took the horse off the windowsill. It had sharp feet and I wondered how it could stand, like women who wore high, high heels. Peeking into the folds and creases, I tried to figure out how Nai-nai did it. I decided I’d unfold one small part, the tail. This told me nothing. I pulled at the legs, then the head, then finally the body until I had a crinkled piece of paper in my hands.

I felt like I had killed something. I looked around the room. What could I do? I couldn’t put it back together. I tried anyway. In the second grade I made the best fortune tellers. The other kids would stand in a line before my desk. Maybe it wasn’t so different. I found the biggest crease and began to fold.

I couldn’t do it. I folded the paper into a square, then a smaller square. I made pointed edges and didn’t know where to put them. It looked nothing like a horse. It didn’t look like anything.

In the bathroom I ripped the paper into tiny shreds and threw them in the toilet. I had to flush twice to get all the pieces down.

I didn’t know if my grandmother ever noticed that the horse was gone. She never said anything and continued to make other animals. This didn’t go on for long. Soon after I flushed the horse, my mother came home with rolls of wool and a pair of blue metallic knitting needles.

“I remembered that you are a good knitter,” she said to Nai-nai. “The weather is getting colder, and Hannah and Grant will be needing socks and sweaters.”

When my grandmother smiled the wrinkles around her eyes deepened so that her eyes seemed to disappear. She nodded and thanked my mother in her raspy voice. She began knitting that night.

The paper animals grew dusty and faded in the sun. My mother threw them away eventually. I didn’t think my grandmother noticed. By November she had knitted five sweater vests, four pairs of socks, and two scarves, all in dull colors: dark blue, olive green, and, most of all, brown. She would cut patterns from old grocery bags and hold them up to me and my brother. The scarves were for my father, and I cringed to see him model each one, first the green, then the blue, with his yellow corduroy

jacket.

“Very nice,” he said. “Very warm.”

My grandmother beamed.

The vests were itchy and smelled old and stale, like Nai-nai’s suitcase when she first moved in. Grant and I hated them.

“What do you say?” our mother asked the first time we tried them on.

“Xie xie, Nai-nai,” we said in unison.

The new boy in Grant’s class had a sweater like our vests. His name was unpronounceable, full of x’s and z’s. He knew no English and cried, his nose filling with snot, whenever anyone spoke to him. His first day, the bus driver put him next to us.

“He’ll feel better,” she told us. “With his own kind.”

By November the boy had stopped crying. He ran around shrieking and flailing his arms. The shrieking didn’t sound like Chinese to me, but it also didn’t sound like English. He couldn’t seem to remember where his permanent seat was, and sat somewhere different every day. The bus driver said nothing, as though this were to be expected.

The first time I wore the vest to school, Ashley Warner said, “Where’d you get that? K-Mart?” She had pale blond hair and blue eyes, round and shiny, like the mannequins’ at the mall. She wore saddle shoes from cheerleading and draped over her shoulders pink sweaters, the arms tied in an effortless knot.

I said nothing. I sat on my fingers, feeling them grow numb. The vest itched and the smell of my grandmother rose all around me.

#

Our teacher announced that for our next project we would give speeches in front of the class.

“It should be an instructional piece,” Mrs. Drescher told us. “It should teach the class how to do something.”

We all groaned and shifted in our seats. Our last project had been to make campaign posters for the states. My state had been Virginia and I had drawn a picture of Mount Rushmore, each president saying something like, “I cannot tell a lie. Virginia is the best.” I got an A. But a speech. I kept waiting for Mrs. Drescher to announce an alternate project. A book report, another poster. Anything.

“People, s’il vous plait,” she said. She always spoke to us in French. “Silence, s’il vous plait. Asseyez votre derrieres. Fermez les bouches.” She said she’d teach us French but never did, so we only knew these bits. “You have two weeks.” She held up two fingers. “Deux semaines.”

After school my best friends, Kerry and Melissa, and I stayed in the library. Neither were in my class that year. Kerry was lucky and got Mrs. Seiber, who had a fair in her class every year. Everyone set up tables signs and sold whatever they wanted, just as long as they kept track of profit and loss. Melissa had Mr. Russo, who was harmless but, Melissa said, picked his nose and wiped the boogers on his mustache. We sat on the floor between the non-fiction shelves, trying to come up with a topic for my speech and ducking whenever Mrs. Gardner, the librarian, came by.

“How about ‘How to Make Peanut Brittle?’” Kerry suggested.

I picked at the carpet. “Don’t you need an over for that?” I asked.

“‘How to Wash Your Dog,’” Melissa said, chewing on one of her braids. She had two dogs.

“I don’t have a dog,” I reminded her, and began scanning the shelves. Macramé, Map-Making, Model Airplanes.

“It’s a dumb project,” Kerry said. “Too bad you have Drescher.”

“Yeah,” Melissa said. “Too bad.”

Needlepoint, Nutcrackers, Oil Painting.

“Maybe you should do ‘How to Do a Dumb Project,’” Kerry said, then fell over laughing. “‘How to Make a Stupid Speech.’”

Melissa laughed. “A sthupid sthpeech!” she said in her pretend retarded voice.

Origami. I looked closer: Origami: How to Make Magic with Paper. I took the book off the shelf.

“How about this?” I asked, holding it up.

They both leaned forward. “Ori – ori – ” Kerry gasped.

Melissa collapsed, howling. “I thought it said orgy!”

I didn’t ask what an orgy was, though I thought it might have something to do with the “nudity” and “adult situations” in the R-rated movies the TV guide described. I flipped through the book. A dog, a frog, a crane. I didn’t see a horse.

“You girls!”

I whipped around. It was Mrs. Gardner. When she was angry the end of her nose turned pink. Now it was red.

“This is a library,” she hissed. “Not a playground!”

Covering her mouth, Kerry came up to me. “What a bitch,” she whispered. “What’s origami anyway?”

I looked slowly through the book again, all the way to the end. I couldn’t find a horse anywhere.

#

I began by making coasters. I didn’t have origami paper so I used the paper my father brought home from his office. It was thick and hard to fold; my fingers were full of grooves from creasing the edges. I thought about using old magazine pages like Nai-nai, but I didn’t want her to see me and ask what I was doing.

The day I brought home the origami book, I had made three coasters by the time it was dark. They weren’t hard at all and looked almost exactly like the ones in the book.

My mother poked her head in my room. “Dinnertime,” she said.

“Look, Mom,” I said, holding up the biggest coaster.

She squinted. “What is it?”

“It’s a coaster. You know.” I lifted my pencil holder and slid the coaster underneath.

“Oh. You’re doing this instead of homework.

I have her now, I thought. “This is homework, Mom. I have to write a speech about how to make something. I have to make a speech in front of the whole class.” I slid the coaster back out.

“A speech? Really?” She seemed impressed, but that faded quickly. Her eyes flicked over my desk. “You’re going to make a speech on those? Are you sure this is for homework? I never know what you’re doing up here.”

“Mom.” I tried to keep calm. “I’m just getting started. I’ll probably do a turtle, or a rabbit. Or a horse.”

“You should get Nai-nai to help you,” she told me. I was ready to protest, but then my mother said, “No, you better not bother her.” Her glance shifted. “She gets so tired.”

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s too much trouble.”

The next day at school Mrs. Drescher asked if anyone had ideas for speeches. Dana Sullivan said she wanted to do needlepoint; her grandmother had taught her. Adam Greene first said he wanted to show people how to bounce a soccer ball on their knees, but Mrs. Drescher shook her head.

“Then I’ll do shorthand,” he said. “My mom’s really good at it.”

I didn’t raise my hand. I thought my idea was the best so far and I held it inside of me. I could almost

feel my blood vibrating under my skin, as though I were about to run a race I knew I would win.

“Hey, Hannah,” Ashley whispered across the aisle. “You know what you should do?” She didn’t wait for me to answer. “You should show us how to make those great vests.” She snorted and poked Dana in the arm. Dana bent her shoulders as though to keep from laughing.

“Shut up,” I said lowly, but Mrs. Drescher was speaking again and nobody heard me. I looked down at my desk, nervous, as though somebody had.

#

One day when my mother wasn’t home, I found my grandmother on the floor scrubbing my mother’s biggest aluminum pot. She was using old magazine pages, and for a moment I thought the pages were the paper animals she had made, and my skin tightened all over as though being rubbed by metal. Then I saw the stack of TIMES at her side. She looked up at me and smiled.

“Your mother works too hard,” she told me, then bent her head back down over the pot.

My father found the crumpled, blackened pages in the garbage after dinner, and seemed to know right away what they had been used for. In the kitchen he yelled at Nai-nai. My neck ached as I stared into my math book. I wasn’t used to my father yelling. My mother stood at the edge of the kitchen. She looked over her shoulder into the family room, then into the kitchen, back and forth.

“Why do you use that garbage?” he asked. “You don’t have to use garbage to clean.”

“It doesn’t matter,” my grandmother said. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. We have good, clean paper towels. That’s what they’re there for.”

“Expensive,” she muttered.

“Do you think that matters now? Do you think we have to worry about that now?” His face was turning red. “You should be resting more. You don’t get enough rest —”

“I’m resting all the time,” my grandmother shot back.

I looked up, surprised to hear Nai-nai raise her voice. My father’s mouth was open.

“I have plenty of time to rest,” she said, her voice normal again.

My father closed his mouth, then left the room.

Nai-nai shook her head and leaned against the counter. My mother went to her and touched her arm.

“Ma,” she said. “Are you all right?”

Nai-nai nodded, though she didn’t look up. Suddenly I noticed that she was breathing hard.

“Do you want to – ” I knew she was about to say “rest,” but she stopped herself. “Do you want to finish that sweater you were knitting for me? I would love to wear it to Mrs. Shu’s house this weekend.”

Her smile strained, my grandmother nodded again and shuffled to her room.

My mother stared at the space Nai-nai had been. When she saw me watching her, she went to the sink and started rinsing the dishes. Then she stooped and looked right at me, as though I had done something wrong.

“Your Nai-nai is too good,” she said, and I wondered why her voice was shaking.

#

The day of my speech was the coldest it had been that fall. Frost dusted our lawn and the birds didn’t come out to feed. When my mother came into my room to lay out my clothes, I was already up going over the directions I had printed on some poster board. I had performed my speech for Kerry and Melissa. Kerry’s crane turned out just like mine, though Melissa couldn’t get hers right.

I didn’t look up as my mother opened and closed drawers. From the corner of my eye, I saw my dark blue jeans and my red and white checkered shirt. Then my mother took out my grandmother’s vest.

My head jerked up. It had been a week since I last wore the vest. The boy from Grant’s class had worn his sweater the same day, and I kept my coat on the whole time, in case we passed in the hallway. “Do I have to wear the vest today?”

“Cold,” my mother grunted. She was always half-asleep in the mornings.

I hugged my legs to my chest and pressed my lips against my knees. “But I don’t want to wear it,” I mumbled.

Blinking, she looked up at me. “What?”

I lifted my chin but kept my eyes on my poster board. “I said I don’t want to wear it.”

“Ai ya, don’t fuss,” she said. “Get up. Time for school.” She walked out of the room.

“But I am up,” I called after her. She didn’t answer.

A wave of dread washed over me. I saw myself standing in front of the classroom wearing the vest. I heard Ashley’s voice: “So Hannah, where are your knitting needles?” I jumped out of bed.

When my mother saw me, she narrowed her eyes. “Where’s the vest?” She was standing at the counter, making our lunches.

I wore nothing over my jeans and checkered shirt. I shivered a little. “I said I didn’t want to wear it.”

“You didn’t want –” She set down her knife. “That’s a very good vest. It’s cold out. You need to wear it.”

I put my book bag and poster board down, and sat at the table. “I don’t want to.” I paused. “I don’t like it.”

Grant looked up from his cereal bowl, his eyes wide.

“What do you mean, you don’t like it?” Her voice grew louder and her words started to run together. “Do you think we’re rich? Are you a princess?” She shook a finger towards the hallway. “Go upstairs and put it on.”

I didn’t move. I thought of saying, “I’ll wear it tomorrow, just not today. Today is my speech. Tomorrow, I promise.” Instead I hunched down and whispered: “No.”

My mother’s eyes flew open and she came rushing at me from behind the counter. “You go upstairs!” she shouted.

I almost jumped up. Then I heard my grandmother’s door creak open and her cotton shoes shuffling across the floor.

My mother retreated behind the counter and tried to smile at my grandmother as she came in. “Morning, Ma,” she said. When she looked back at me, her face was full of lines.

“Morning, Nai-nai,” Grant and I said together.

Smiling she came to the table. “Getting ready for school,” she said.

“Yes, Nai-nai,” we said.

She spotted the poster board at my feet. “Is this your project, Ha-nah?”

I could still feel my mother’s eyes on me. “Yes, Nai-nai,” I said.

“You draw very well. Just like your father.” She smiled one last time, then shuffled back to her room.

Without looking at my mother, I put on my coat and gathered my things.

“Hey, wait for me!” Grant called as I went out the door. I heard my mother shout at him to keep eating.

The bus stop was empty. I sat on the curb, the concrete cold through my jeans. I imagined the other kids watching me through their windows, wondering what I was doing. My breath turned to smoke as it hit the air.

#

We didn’t give our speeches till the afternoon.

“Have a nice hearty lunch to give you energy,” Mrs. Drescher told us.

I felt my stomach turn.

Everyone was quiet after we got back. Nobody raised their hands when Mrs. Drescher asked questions out of our social studies book. When she asked Adam Greene what the capital of Peru was, he only shook his head. Finally she closed her book.

We went alphabetically, so I was almost last. I couldn’t pay attention to the other speeches. Bridget Greer did something about papier mache. Steve Schwartz’s was about sand art. I thought I might explode. I juggled my food till Adam Greene turned around and told me to cut it out.

It was Rebecca West’s turn. She always went right before me in spelling bees and gym. Hers was about how to make Rice Crispy Treats. Everyone cheered, and by the end all the Rice Crispies were gone. Kenny O’Conner got marshmallow caught in his hair.

“Thank you, Rebecca,” Mrs. Drescher said. She lifted her chin. “Hannah Wong.”

I wiped my hands on my jeans and brought my poster board to the front of the room. I set it on the chalk ledge of the blackboard, handed out some paper, then cleared my throat.

“I am going to show you how to make a crane,” I announced. “With origami.”

Everyone paid attention. They watched my hands as I folded each crease, as I held up the part-way finished crane, and as I pointed at my own instructions, like they’d miss something if they took their eyes away for even a second. They called out, “Wait!” and “Show that again.” Even Ashley paid attention, though she wouldn’t look at me directly.

When I held up my finished crane, a breath went out around the room. Everyone looked up and down between my crane and theirs. They breathed again.

“Show us again, Hannah,” someone said.

“Yeah, c’mon.”

“Just one more.”

Mrs. Drescher clapped her hands. “People, s’il vous plait. Fermez les bouches.” She stood and smiled at me. “Very nice, Hannah. Thank you.”

When I sat down, Adam Greene turned around. “You’ll have to show me how to do that again, Hannah,” he whispered. “Mine turned out stupid.” He grinned.

He had dimples on either side of his mouth and his eyes were big with long lashes, like a girl’s. All I could do was nod.

At recess we played running bases. I ran back and forth with my coat flapping open. The cool air blew up underneath and lifted it around me.

“Mom!” I called when I got home. I slammed the door and dumped my bag and poster by the stairs.
“Mom!”

She was sitting in the kitchen, reading the newspaper.

“Mom, everyone liked my speech,” I told her. “They wanted me to do it again.”

She didn’t look up.

I leaned against a chair. “You know, my speech? With the origami? They liked the crane.”

She continued to read. I watched her for a few moments. She read down and across; she turned the page and creased the edge. She took another sip of coffee. I turned around and left the kitchen. When I looked back, she was still reading, as though I were never there.

#

Days passed, and my mother still didn’t speak to me. She didn’t come into my room in the mornings and she didn’t make my lunch. I wore all my new sweaters and ate Twinkies and Ripples every day. I usually couldn’t finish them and gave the leftovers to Kenny O’Connor, who squired the Twinkie cream onto the chips and ate them together.

At dinner my mother looked over my head and past my face. When I turned her way, she blinked as though I were a glaring light. I had to look away. I stared in my bowl and counted how many bites it took to chew up my food. Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight. I took two sips of milk after every bite. I kept track of how many sips were in a glass.

My father would look between my mother and me. I thought he wanted to say something, but he never did, at least not to me. I don’t know if he ever asked my mother what was wrong, what happened. I could imagine her answer: “Your children are so spoiled. Your children are ruined.” I wondered if he’d believe her.

At night I went straight to my room. I sat at my desk with one light on and made crane after crane. My desk was covered with them, and my fingers were sore with red welts. Sometimes my father poked his head in and asked me what I was doing.

“Nothing,” I always said, and he’d leave. Once he came in and turned on my radio.

“It’s too quiet in here,” he said, stayed a moment longer, then left.

Nai-nai caught the flu. Grant had been sick so my father thought she must have gotten it from him. That whole week she didn’t leave her room. My mother or father went in and out, carrying dishes, bowls, and cups. Usually they were still full when my parents came back out.

Those days I'd catch my father staring into space. He never did nothing. Even while he ate, he read or went over his reports from the lab. After catching him I'd feel embarrassed and walk away. Once he looked up and caught my eye. He tried to laugh and said he was thinking about what he was going to watch on television. I didn't know what to say.

Nai-nai got better after a week, though she still stayed in her room a lot. I was glad. Now it was like before she came; I didn't have to scrounge up things to say in my bad Chinese. My mother talked to me more, mostly did I do my homework or had I brushed my teeth. I knew not to ask her any questions.

That Saturday after Nai-nai felt better, my parents went to play mah-jongg. I heard her the night before, pushing them to go.

"I'm better now," she said. "Don't worry about me. You should have fun."

My father still looked worried, but the next morning he got ready to go. He took me aside.

"Take care of Nai-nai, okay?" he said. "Look in her room a few times, ask her if she's hungry, and warm up some dinner for her. Mom left some food in the refrigerator." He looked nervous. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

I nodded. "Yes, Dad."

He patted my shoulder while my mother, pulling hard at her gloves, glanced away from me as they left.

I turned around and my insides jumped. Nai-nai had appeared behind me.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. "Would you like a pear?"

"No, thank you, Nai-nai," I said, and went upstairs.

Although Grant wasn't home to bother me, I closed my door. It was a sunny day but I shut my curtains. I liked the thick, filtered light that crept through; my room felt dark and golden.

I wanted to make the star. The book said that if you made six of them – one in the middle and five around – you could put them together and make a giant star to go on top of your Christmas tree. I finished the six stars quickly, but when I put them together I was disappointed. The giant star looked clumsy, as though it would fall apart any minute. I separated it and tossed the pieces onto my bookshelf with the other things I had made. I flipped through the book. Everything was familiar now: the frog that could jump, the pagoda you could stack up high, the coaster, the crane. I had learned everything and didn't want to make anymore.

At five I went to check on my grandmother, and as I walked downstairs, I decided I'd make Grant do it after he got home from his friend's. The kitchen and family room were dark, except for the orange light the sun threw on the walls. It was getting darker sooner and faster. I stood in the kitchen for a minute, listening to the quiet, wondering how long it would go on.

A noise came from Nai-nai's room. I held my breath and listened. There it was again, the ripping of paper. I crept across the kitchen and saw that her door was open, and as I leaned in close, could see her sitting by her bed, her hands moving, flashing white in the dim light. The curtains in her room were open: you could see the woods and the sun setting orange behind them.

She looked up at me and smiled. "Ha-nah," she said.

"It's dark in here, Nai-nai," I said.

"Is it?" She looked around. "So it is." She didn't move.

I hovered at the door, then inches in, expecting the smell of her to overwhelm me. But all I smelled was our own house. I switched on the lamp beside her.

"Yes, that's better," she said. In the light I could see the open magazine in her lap, and in her hands, a finished paper horse. She saw me looking and held the horse up higher. "You make these too, right?"

My cheeks reddened. I didn't think she had seen. "Nai-nai, are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?"

"You make the bird," she said, as if I had said nothing at all, and waved her fingers. "I never knew how to make the bird. Will you show me?"

She held out to me the magazine, one of my father's old National Geographics. It was opened to a page of a swamp at sunset; across the sky a flock of long-necked birds soared. I took the magazine from her and ripped out two pages. I gave her one and sat on the floor.

I had a feeling she already knew how to make the crane, especially when she got it perfect on the first try. She held the two cranes by the tails and set them on her desk, side by side. They were shiny black, splashed with bright orange. Here and there was a beak, a wing. She picked up the magazine.

"Now would you like me to show you how to make something?"

"I – " My voice cracked. "I don't know. Which one?"

"Whichever one you want."

The pages we used were of the ocean, dark blue with the bright red and green arms of sea plants and corals. The trick to the horse was to use a rectangular sheet of paper instead of a square and to keep your edges perfectly even. Otherwise the legs came out lopsided and the horse wouldn't stand. I watched my grandmother make the first one. She bent her head low over her lap. The bundle of hair at the back of her neck seemed heavy. People said her hair had once been beautiful, swinging down to her waist in shining black waves. She lifted her head and held up her horse.

"Now you try," she said.

Mine came out flat-looking and fell over when I set it on the desk. On my second try, my grandmother began to speak.

“My mother taught me how to do this,” she said. “Of course she taught me how to knit and stitch, and my father taught me how to read and write. But when it was hot at night and I didn’t want to hold the heavy cloth, my mother brought out the paper. It was much better paper than this, of course. So thin you could see through it, but very strong. We made a whole zoo.

“I was very sad when I had to leave my mother,” she went on, “when I got married. On my last night home, I went into her room and said, Every night I am away from you, I will make a paper horse until I have a thousand paper horses. Then I will burn them, and when you see the smoke and fire in the night, you know it will be me. And do you know what she said to me?”

I shook my head.

“Don’t you have anything better to do than to make paper horses?” She laughed, surprising me. “I was very angry at first and thought she didn’t understand me. She was right of course. I was young and foolish. But still I missed her.” She looked up at me. “Do you miss your mother?”

My eyes filled. I shrugged and looked down at my unfinished horse. It looked squashed and deformed.

“People do what they think is right,” my grandmother was saying. “Strong people are hard to bend. Like paper.” She set down her finished horse. It stood next to her first without rocking, steady on its perfect legs.

I wiped my eyes and picked up the horses. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to make them.

She sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. She was breathing hard, like on the day my father yelled at her about the paper towels. I put down the horses and peered into her face.

“Nai-nai?” I whispered.

She opened her eyes and smiled. “I think I’ll take a nap. Then will you bring me my dinner?”

I nodded and put out my arm for her as if I had done it a thousand times. Her grip was strong and I was surprised she was so heavy, as though her bones were filled with lead. She sat on the bed and slipped off her shoes.

“Thank you, Ha-nah,” she murmured, lying down. She closed her eyes.

Later I brought her dinner, but she was still asleep. I left the food on her desk.

I woke up twice that night, once when my parents came home from mah-jongg, and the second time when the ambulance came for my grandmother. I heard the siren and saw the flashing red lights, but I thought it must have been for another house. Then I heard my parents’ voices, and the sound of the front door, opening and closing.

As I went downstairs, I pictured my grandmother on a gurney surrounded by men in white coats and masks, her nose and arms full of tubes. But by the time I reached the foyer, everyone was gone, except for my mother. She stood in the open doorway and watched the ambulance pass by, its light still flashing but silent.

A gust of wind blew in and I shivered. The sky was still dark, only its edges pale with light.

Without turning around, my mother said, “Nai-nai is very sick.” She closed the door and went into the kitchen.

I followed. At the table she sat and covered her face. For the first time, I noticed how much her hands were like mine – small with wide knuckles and thin wrists – except that on hers, light brown spots dotted her skin, floating, they seemed, just under the surface. I hadn’t noticed those before either.

Suddenly, I found myself asking her, “Do you want to see what I made?”

She removed her hands from her face and looked at me, confused. “What?”

“Do you want to see what I made?” Then without waiting for her to answer, I ran up to my room.

I dropped one or two paper figures on my way back down, but I didn’t stop to pick them up. I dumped them all in front of my mother.

Still confused, she sifted through the figures – frogs, cranes, and stars. She looked up at me. “You made all these?” she asked.

I nodded.

“When?”

I turned away and shrugged. When I turned back, my mother was covering her eyes again.

“Oh, and these!” I ran into Nai-nai’s room and grabbed the paper horses off her desk. In the kitchen I held them up. “Nai-nai made these. She showed me.” I set the figures carefully on the table.

My mother touched a horse’s ear, a stubby tail. It felt like a long time before she spoke. “Maybe,” she said, “you can show me how sometime.”

I ran a finger along the thick, stiff back of the other horse and nodded.

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