8. Cracks

“How do you think it will happen?”

“How do you mean?”

“When we die.”

She rolled over in bed to face him. “You’re not curious about what happens afterwards?”

“No.” He was lying on his back, and she could faintly make out his figure by the dim glow of the light from outside the door.

“Why not?”

“Because everyone asks that question. It’s not that interesting.”

She stared at him, trying to make out the expression on his face. He seemed almost distracted, idle. His chest rose and fell steadily, and she could see that his eyes were open, though what he was staring at she couldn’t tell.

“How do *you* think it will happen?” she replied.

“I asked you first.”

She smacked his arm lightly. “You know I hate it when you do that,” she said. “You ask me a silly question and then you act like a child when I try and get you to explain to me why you even asked it.”

She turned onto her back as well and stared at the ceiling. There was a crack that ran from the ceiling fan to the leftmost wall that had always bothered her. The ceiling had a square tiled pattern - which also bothered her - and this crack cut across the squares in a way that was so close to being symmetrical, but not quite. Maybe that’s what he had been looking at.

“I haven’t really thought about the how,” she said. “It’s always the what, isn’t it? And when we die I believe there’s nothing after that, so I’m not sure that the how much matters.”

“If there’s nothing after, then wouldn’t the how matter the most?”

“Why?”

“If there’s no afterlife, then the act of dying is the last thing you’ll ever do. It’s the most significant thing we do.”

“Well, that’s just silly.” She focused on how the crack started to split one of the tiles diagonally, but then diverged ever so slightly on the other side. Really, it was quite annoying. “Living is the most significant thing we do. Dying plays no part in it.”

“You don’t think it’s significant?”  
 “I think it’d be an awful shame if it was. When people die, it’s not a controllable circumstance. My grandfather died from a heart attack and my grandmother had Alzheimers. They died rather insignificantly, when you think about it. It was all a very quiet affair. So I don’t see why it matters how you die. You’re alive until you aren’t.”

Again he said nothing. She studied the crack, her annoyance suddenly growing. “Why did you ask me that anyway?” She traced the crack across three tiles, where it split each of them into two uneven pieces, only to stop three quarters of the way through splitting a fourth. “You probably think you’re going to die a grand death, is that it? You want to go out in a blaze of glory so that the world will remember your name?”

The silence rang out in the dark. “No,” he said at last. “I just don’t want to disappear.”

“Oh.” She felt a knot in her stomach, unsure of where it came from. Maybe she’d been a little too harsh on him. She rolled over, facing him again. “If that’s all, then don’t worry. You won’t be dying any time soon.”

He hummed.

She kissed his cheek. “Well, goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

After a while, her breathing evened and he let out a long sigh. He stared at the ceiling, just noticing a long crack in the tile. His hands lay over his stomach with his fingers intertwined as though he were already in the grave.

8. One Thousand Paper Cranes

She gives me the first crane one Tuesday in September, just after lunch.

“Here,” she says, placing it gently on top of my school books.

The crane is silver and couldn't be bigger than a penny, a delicate thing. She’s folded it out of my gum wrapper and the paper is the wrong shape for a crane, but she’s made it work. It has tiny wings and an even tinier beak bent just so.

“Thank you. That’s really awesome,” I say, and I mean it. She’s always been the creative one. She smiles at me, and a crane she folded in thirty seconds is no big deal to her, but I feel a sense of gratitude that I need her to understand.

“I can’t make any origami,” I add lamely.

“It’s no big deal,” she says. “I learned how to make them in elementary school, when we read that book.”  
 “What book?”

“You know, the one about the thousand paper cranes?”

I shake my head.

“Well,” she says, “the story goes that if you fold one thousand paper cranes, then you get one wish. I tried to get to one thousand, but I was seven so I gave up. Now I just fold them because it’s fun.”

The lunch bell rings and we stand up, gathering our books. I make sure to hold mine flat so that the crane doesn’t fall or get crushed.

“Do you think you ever got to one thousand without realizing it?” I ask as we merge with the crowd towards the exit. “Maybe you’ve earned a wish already.”

“Maybe,” she replies, “but I don’t think that’s how it works. The folding has to be intentional for someone to get a wish.”

“I see,” I say, though I’m not sure I do, and the conversation ends itself as the traffic of people separates us on our way to class.

She gives me the second crane the next day at lunch, a third from a post-it note on her locker, a fourth sneakily passed to me in algebra and folded out of old homework. At first I keep them on the top shelf of my locker, but soon the flock grows and I start taking them home.

The biggest cranes are made out of full sheets of paper. They sit on my bookshelves, surveying the room. The smaller ones are made of post-its and scraps of paper, and at some point there’s so many that I have to get them a box. The gum wrappers keep coming every day, and I can’t bring myself to box up the tiny silver birds. It would be like clipping their wings. Instead, they line my windowsills in rows like tiny platoons, spill onto my desk on top of my papers, sit in front of the biggest cranes like a family.

I start to count them. Every time she gives me a crane, I add another tally to a sheet of paper I keep in my locker. I don’t tell her about this part. I almost did one lunch, when she was folding a crane, and then I really saw her folding. There’s a tenderness in the way she makes the cranes, like even when she’s done it hundreds of times she takes the same care with each bird. She hands today’s crane to me cradled in her palm, and it’s a living, breathing thing.

I’m afraid this is a fragile thing, that by acknowledging it I might somehow break it. I say thank you. I take the crane home. I write down number three hundred and four and keep it to myself.

She gives me the one thousandth crane the day of our graduation. We’re standing in a crowd of our classmates on the football field, dressed in our blue graduation robes and newly armed with diplomas. The sky is as clear as it’s ever been and there’s a playful wind that weaves between us and lifts up the bottoms of our robes. Even so, I wish there had been some clouds out of respect if nothing else. I’m headed east, she’s headed west. This is the last time any of us will be in the same place for a long time, maybe forever.

I’m chatting with my family when she sneaks up behind me and taps me on the shoulder.

“Happy graduation,” she says, handing me a crane. “I think I owe you this.”

The crane has been folded from our graduation program. She must have spent extra time on this one, because I see my name face up on one wing, and her name hiding just before the fold of the other one.

“Thank you,” I say, fighting the waver in my voice. What a lovely coincidence, that the last crane she’ll ever give me is the one thousandth one. I wonder if I should tell her now that she’s earned her wish. Maybe if we’re already at the end it won’t break the spell.

I can’t do it. Instead I ask, “Do you think we’ll ever see each other again?”

She takes my hand that holds the crane in both of hers, cradling it as I cradle the crane. Gently, she cups her hands around mine so that they gently cover the paper.

“I know we will.”