

Disclaimer:

This story explores themes of grief, loss, and emotional. It includes depictions of a grieving parent, references to a child's disappearance and implied death, and self-destruction in the form of a paper figure. My intention in writing this piece was to show how deep, unresolved grief can distort memory and healing — and how letting go can be an act of love. The characters and events are entirely fictional and are not drawn from my personal experience. I do not wish to romanticize mental anguish or being completely apathetic and numb, and I understand that for some readers, the subject matter may be sensitive. This piece is meant to evoke empathy and reflection, not distress.

Statement on Authorship

This work is original work created by me, Mohammad Saif Shaikh and does not violate policy on academic integrity including our policy on plagiarism or use of AI.

“The Paper Son”

The paper was illegal.

Not in any official document, not named by any ministry or government, but in the whispers, people talked about it. It seemed like it carried weight. It carried memory.

It sat in her lap now, folded in a yellow parcel wrapped with a silk string, soft as her breath. Her hands, cracked and raw from the winter dish soap, from time, hovered over it. For the hundredth time she was about to put it away. But not today.

Today was Yun’s birthday.

Yet, the apartment was silent, except for the kettle’s lonely whimper. She let it sob on the burner, left it untouched. An aged yet undamaged photograph hung above the rice cooker: Yun, age seven, beaming in a jacket too big for him. One front tooth missing. One sock slipping, One eye lazier than the other. All of it gone.

It had been two years since the sirens came and left her life quieter than she ever asked for.

The apartment walls had stopped listening to the single mother’s cries after that. She had shouted into them, even punched a dent into the kitchen cabinet. They never answered. They didn’t have any emotions to share.

She slid the parcel open.

Inside were 30 shimmering sheets of gonzhi – forbidden spirit-fold paper, each one laced with copper thread and hair thick ink lines that shined when turned. The elders believed the sheet could hold memory itself.

By evening, the kitchen floor was scoured with scraps. Cranes with too many legs, half folded hands, heads with mouths that wouldn't close. She worked by candlelight. Everything she made came out imperfect – jagged, uneven, uncertain.

Until,

she began folding a boy, resembling her son, her hands moved without hesitation. Every crease fell into place like memory. She had shaped him a thousand times in her mind; her grief had preserved him with perfect precision.

She folded by pressing gently at each corner, breathing in as she pinched the final seam. Then the arms. Bent and curved like Yun's had always been when he ran, holding his invisible airplanes. Legs next, one slightly longer — just like him.

She saved the head for last.

When she pressed the final crease behind the ear, the paper warmed under her palm.

He blinked. Not suddenly - like waking from a nap.

“Mama?” he whispered.

She dropped the scissors. They clattered across the tiles and into the wall.

He sat up — rustling like a breeze through bamboo. His skin shimmered with ink and creases, but he tilted his head just the way Yun used to, waiting to be told what came next.

“Mama?” he said again, voice like parchment rubbing against silk.

She fell to her knees.

Her tears hit his chest and disappeared without a sound.

For weeks, they lived in the kind of quiet joy that felt too perfect to last. It was as if he'd never left, like the world had quietly folded itself back together.

She taught him to eat — or at least to pretend, lifting rice grains to his mouth only to let them flutter down like snow. She braided his folds when they crinkled in sleep. Just like the curious character of Yun, he asked about clouds, about TV cartoons, about why the neighbors played the same sad song every night. She laughed more than she had in years.

Her mind was losing the thought of him being a paper.

But he never slept. Not fully.

She would wake to find him staring at the ceiling, unmoving. Once, she caught him pressing his hand to the stove, testing the heat like a question. Another time, he stood in the doorway at dawn, whispering to the wind.

One evening, just as a brittle leaf broke off the stem and fluttered down, he looked up and asked, “Mama, what’s... dying?”

She froze. The knife in her hand hovered over the spring onion.

“Where did you hear that?” she whispered.

He blinked. “TV. The lady said someone passed away. Where did they go?”

She turned off the stove.

“They went to rest. Deep rest.”

“Can paper die?”

She hesitated. That pause was all it took to incite the unwanted curiosity.

She reached for him, but he backed away.

“Please don’t hide it from me,” he whispered.

And then, things quietly began to unfold.

First, he crimped his arms at odd angles. Then his neck. One morning, she found his face reshaped — the soft curve of his smile pinched into jagged peaks. He no longer carried the innocence of Yun. He looked... defensive. Calculated.

She tried to stop him. Sat him down and smoothed his creases. Read him bedtime stories. Sang lullabies. But every day, he came back sharper. The thought of death was beginning to fold him from the inside out.

He no longer played with the paper birds they made together. Instead, he shredded them — not in anger, but in fear, as if their fragility revealed something unbearable. He began folding himself smaller, tighter, pulling in his edges until he creaked when he moved.

“Mama,” he whispered one night, peering out from under the table, “if I fold myself enough times... will I disappear?”

She crouched beside him, heart splintering. “No my love. You’ll still be you.”

“I don’t want to be me,” he said. “Me is breakable.”

In the days that followed, he began tearing pages from books, peeling wallpaper from corners, hunting for more material. Anything foldable to craft armor. The kitchen drawers were emptied, his bed dismantled. He stacked makeshift shields around himself and tucked into the smallest corners of the apartment - more creature than child.

The apartment became filled with scraps: paper limbs, torn folds, ruined attempts at immortality. She cleaned up what she could. Whispered lullabies. Smoothed his blankets even when he wasn't in them. But he only returned sharper, harder, layered in angles that no longer resembled her son.

One morning, she found him perched on the windowsill, shaped like something that had forgotten how to be touched. Long folded limbs extended like blades. His eyes, once wide and curious, were sunken between pleats.

"You can't outrun what you are," she whispered, kneeling beside the couch.

"I'm not running," he said. "I'm changing. If I keep changing, it won't catch me. I'm safe like this," he said without looking at her.

She stood in the doorway, hands shaking. "You were never meant to be safe. You were meant to live."

He turned. "Living means ending."

She tried to hold him. He recoiled. "Don't smooth me out," he hissed. "You'll make me soft again." Her hands fell to her sides. Her eyes, dry. Not because she lacked tears — but because she had cried them all before, he returned.

Two weeks had passed, he kept folding himself silently in the hallway, she lit a candle and cleared the kitchen floor. Dust hung in the air like suspended snow.

When he emerged, his silhouette filled the doorway. He was unrecognizable. It was an amalgam of paper and fear — a paper creature of wings, claws, masks layered upon masks. She couldn't tell where his face began or ended.

Yun was gone; what stood there was her sorrow, wearing his shape.

“I made myself strong,” he said. “Stronger than dying.”

She held the matchbox without shaking.

“I love you enough to let go.” She whispered

And for the first time, he didn’t flinch from her touch — he flinched from the truth.

He hesitated. Then nodded — the most human movement he had made in weeks.

She struck the match.

The flame took him softly. No screaming. No struggle. As if he’d been waiting to be released.

The scent of old ink and candle wax rose with the smoke. She stayed until he was gone.

He was brought back out of love- the same love that finally set him free.

Handwritten Draft

The Paper Son

Inciting Opening → The paper was illegal.

Not by law but by fear and belief. People say it carries memory. The mother, an Asian woman sits with a parcel carrying the paper. on Yun's birthday. She hasn't used it. Photo of Yun hangs above rice cooker, is old but crisp. She opens the gorshi paper.

she folds many things, cranes, hands but nothing is perfect. When it comes to her son though, her hands stop hesitating. Creases and folds are perfect. It's in her memory because of pain. Arms like Yun's, legs unweary. When she presses the last fold. He magically blinks.

He says 'mama?' and she collapses. Her grief turns into astonishment. She teaches him stuff, like to eat, lullabies, braids his ~~to~~ creases. Slowly, as she spends time with him, she forgets he's made of paper.

But there are signs. (like he doesn't sleep). Stares at places. He is curious like Yun. After watching a lady on TV, he asks his "mom" "what's dying?" (As a leaf falls). She hesitates to answer, and that makes ^{him} ~~her~~ more curious.

That's his when his demons are begining, he begins folding himself tighter. His body tone changes to being defensive, tense. He hides at places, asks if paper can die. He shreds the birds they made, tears up and causes havoc in the house. Looking for paper to make himself stronger and to protect himself. She tries to hold him back lullabies, stories but nothing brings ~~back~~ back the boy.

Eventually, he becomes monstrous, with wings claws and becomes kind of dangerous. The mother can't see Yun anymore. Just her sorrow in the form of that origami she lights a ~~card~~ match and puts the origami on fire. No ~~etc~~ screams. Just a want of release.

Grief \rightarrow Obsession \rightarrow Release

Conflict \rightarrow Grief exists, paper son becomes afraid, and the mother is forced to choose

Change \rightarrow From sorrow \rightarrow finally accepting loss.

Theme \rightarrow TO LET GO