

My Wish

Someone once told me that if you folded one thousand paper cranes, you would have a chance for one special wish to come true. I don't remember who, and I don't remember where. I don't even remember if it actually happened. Although, that doesn't really matter. Does it?

I stared at the clock across the room. I watched the second's hand slowly tick around the face, and whenever it did so, the minute's hand would move to the right ever so slightly. I lost track of time staring at the clock, fighting a losing battle against my thoughts.

A disembodied voice from outside the room snapped me back to reality: "You have a visitor."

There was silence, then the door slowly crept open, like it was afraid of something. There were two people in the doorway: a friend, and a familiar stranger. I didn't know the stranger's name, and he walked away before I was able to ask.

My friend took a step forward, then stopped. She blinked. Her shoulders were moving up and down as she breathed heavily into her mask. Her hair was in a messy ponytail that I could tell she'd hastily thrown together. She wore a white blouse and jeans. The same jeans that I had gotten as a birthday present for her. I could tell. She stared at me, and I stared at her. I never had experienced pin-drop silence before, and I don't think I ever will, so that moment would probably be the closest I would ever get. I gave her a small wave.

"Hey," she said, breaking the silence as her eyes slowly panned around the room.

"Hey," I said with a smile. She probably couldn't see the smile through my mask, so I tried to lift the mask with my cheeks so she could tell that I was smiling. "Did you bring what I asked for?"

She froze for a second, then her eyes focused back on me. “I guess,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

She shrugged and started walking towards me, then sat down in the chair in the corner to my right.

“10,000 is a huge number you know?” she said to me as she took a seat. “Do you even know how long that’s going to take?”

I could hear her voice trailing off towards the end as if realizing she shouldn’t have asked me that question. She averted her gaze to the foot of my bed.

“I mean, what else am I gonna do?” I said. “They won’t let me do much of anything else here.”

“But are you sure 10,000?” she repeated.

Whenever she was anxious she repeated herself. That was something I knew from spending basically my whole life with her. She claimed she didn’t, and that I was the one who did. Whatever.

“That’s going to take a lot of time,” she said.

“Luckily, I have a lot to spend,” I said with a laugh.

I smiled inwardly and shrugged weakly.

“I dunno,” I said. “Someone told me it was 10,000. Can’t remember who it was, but I’m positive it was 10,000.”

She was always able to see through my lies, and I was sure she saw through this one as well. I felt bad lying to her, but it’s been something I’ve been thinking about for a while.

“Whatever you say,” she said, then ruffled through her bag. “Here.” She pulled out small cubes, one by one, and placed them on a small table next to her. There were ten in total. “Once you’re done you get a wish right?” she asked me. “What’ll you wish for?”

I smiled and said, “You do know that if I say it out loud it won’t come true, right?”

She let out a small sigh. “Yeah...”

“Alright, no time like the present,” I said. “Let’s get started!”

She pulled open the lid on one of the boxes and placed the open box on the table next to me. It smelled strongly of disinfectant, but everything here did. On the small box next to me were some Japanese characters I couldn’t read and the number 1005 printed in tiny black text in the bottom-right corner. The other boxes looked identical to this one.

I turned to my right to grab the box and felt a dull pain in my abdomen as I did so. I winced slightly, hoping my friend didn’t notice. It disappeared as quickly as it came, and I returned to my usual posture on my bed with the box. I pulled out one sheet of paper from the box and stared at it.

Its bright colors were a stark contrast to the pale blue sheet that lay on top of me and the beige wall across from me. That slip of paper was a welcome burst of color.

“This is nice paper,” I said. “I hope you didn’t spend too much on all of it.”

“Not at all,” she said.

“You remember how to fold them right?”

“Who was the one who taught me how? I could never forget.”

We both smiled at each other and reminisced on times long gone.

Time flew by as my friend and I folded cranes in silence. Well, not quite silence, because of the dull hum of the machine next to me, but it was as close to silence as I ever get. Every crane we folded was placed gently on the table to my right, and slowly the pile grew.

Suddenly, my friend's phone rang, breaking the hours of silence. She made the final few folds on the crane she was working on, then pulled her phone out of her bag.

"Hello?" she said. Then she shot a quick glance at me and quickly looked at her pile of cranes after seeing me stare at her. "Yeah." There was a slight questioning and affirmative tone in her voice. "Okay." Based on her tone of voice the conversation was done. She hung up.

"Your parents?" I asked.

She looked at me. "Yeah," she said with a hint of disappointment in her voice. "My parents want me home for dinner."

"Oh, I didn't realize that much time had passed," I said. I wanted to ask when she would come to see me again but was too scared to.

"I'll stop by soon and bring off a box you can put all the cranes in," she told me as if reading my mind.

"I don't know if they'll let you do that," I said with a slight chuckle. "They're pretty strict about things like that."

"I'll find a way." The way she said that made it feel ominous, but also very assuring.

"Don't get yourself in any trouble," I said as she got up and walked to the door.

I saw her glance at the picture also on the table to my right. I brought it so I wouldn't feel lonely. Within the jet-black frame of the picture were the two of us. My friend held up a silver medal in front of her face proudly as her ponytail stuck up high in the air. I don't think I have ever seen her without a ponytail. Although the camera didn't catch it, I already knew she had a

face-wide smile on her face. I had seen that smile enough times for it to be burned forever into my memory. Next to her was a shorter girl with a smile not as big, but just as heavy. She held a gold medal in front of her chest and close to her body. She looked away from the camera and at her own feet. We'd both really changed since then.

"I'll try not to," she said, "but no promises." She finally smiled, or I think she did. I couldn't see it. "See you tomorrow."

"See ya," I called out as the door gently swung shut.

The weeks flew by as I spent all of my time folding cranes. Six empty boxes lay neatly folded, practically undamaged, on the table to the right of my bed. The people who came in wanted to throw them away, but I wouldn't let them. Three unopened and one opened box remained on the same table. In front of the table was a large cardboard box. I couldn't see the bottom of the box now, and only a layer of rainbow-colored paper folded into the shapes of cranes. There were some sheets of printer paper on the table to my right that were full of tally marks. Actually, six were full, three were blank, and one was a quarter full. A few people had visited me during this time, but it was just the usual: family members, a lot of friends I don't remember making, and some other people I didn't really care to know.

They all kept saying the same things to me, which got really boring after a while. But I knew they meant well. If anything I was the asshole for thinking that way. They brought me cards and flowers. Daisies, carnations—mostly pink—lots of hyacinths, only white ones, and lilies, a bit too soon for those. Some of them had long chats with me, which bored me to pieces, but I endured for their peace of heart.

More days passed, and soon the end was in sight. The box was almost full. Nothing much of note happened, just more visitors. Some guy came dressed entirely in the same pale blue of

my bed sheet with an overgarment as white as my walls. He came in to tell me some things others might find important, but I already knew most of everything he said. Not all of the terminology, maybe, but I didn't need to know the terminology. So to me what he said wasn't important. His monotone voice and lackadaisical posture radiated the "I don't get paid enough for this" aura. I didn't really know how to respond to what he said, so I just stared at him and nodded. When he'd finished his spiel I blinked. It's strange how once you make up your mind to do something, you get all awkward. That blink was probably the most uncomfortable blink in my life. My eyes felt dry, and I thought I had gotten an eyelash in my eye. I think I held my eyes closed for a little too long. Oh well.

Two days after the man visited me, my friend visited me again.

"Hey," I said, giving her a small wave. "I finished and even have some paper to spare."

My cheerful voice made her frown a little. I think she frowned. This was our usual greeting. Since she visited so often we'd formed a habit out of it.

"See?" I held up a small stack of Post-it-sized paper.

She watched as I tried to crumple the stack of papers in my hand, failed, and then, sticking to my plan, threw them in the direction of the trash can. With practiced efficiency, I brought my hand back, as far as it would go while I was still in my bed, and thrust my elbow forward then extended my arm for the perfect throw. I felt my muscles tense as I gave it all I had. The paper pathetically stuck to my hand and unceremoniously drifted delicately to the floor directly next to my bed. My friend stared at me, and I stared at her.

She walked into the room and sat next to the pile of paper on the floor beside my bed. With stiff motions, she picked up the paper, took three steps over to the trash can, and dropped the paper into the trash can.

I let out an awkward laugh and scratched the side of my neck. “That’s what I meant to do,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Mmm.”

“Can you believe we’re done?” I said. “I didn’t think we could. 10,000 really is a really, really big number.”

I had folded so many paper cranes I felt like I could do it in my sleep. My hands and arms were sore, and my fingers were numb. Probably from the constant folding.

“Mmm,” said my friend.

“Yeah…” My voice slowly died out. “Wait, don’t you have classes?”

“Mm-hm.” I heard her voice crack slightly.

She stood over me silently for what felt like too long. Her gaze quickly darted to the picture on the table next to me, to the clock, then back to me. It was so fast I almost didn’t catch it.

The silence was getting unbearable, and I needed to break it.

“Do you think I’m getting fat?” I asked her a random question and pinched my stomach.

She blinked hard and I saw her head do a small, short recoil as I caught her off guard with my question. Her messy ponytail shook. I saw her mask slightly scrunch into her face as she took a small short sharp breath in. Cute.

“All I’ve been doing is eating and sleeping,” I said. “I was thinking that maybe I’ve put on some weight.”

“I think if anything,” she said, picking her words carefully and speaking slowly, “you’ve been losing weight.”

“You think?”

“Mm-hm.”

We both fell silent as my gaze drifted around the room. The chair that she always sat in when she visited was in the same position across from me and to my right. There was a large window letting in rays of light through its half-drawn curtains to my right. White drapes stood on each side of the window, fully drawn, creating an insurmountable barrier between the walls of my room and the outside world. On the sill of the window lay a plethora of flowers in vases. Looking at them from the inside of the room, they blended in seamlessly with the greenery of the outside world. The television mounted to the wall directly across from me hung lifeless and dark like it always has. I could make out a blurry figure in the reflection, but couldn't see her face. I didn't want to. There was an awful noise coming from my left that I didn't pay attention to. On top of the white, wooden table directly to my right lay a stack of ten boxes folded neatly in the corner. There were other small miscellaneous items that I liked to keep close at hand, but what stood front and center, was a picture of two girls encircled by a lightless ink-like noir frame. We really changed since then. There was also a clock.

“Oh,” I broke the silence, “I've got something for you.”

I tried to sit up, but she gently pushed me back down on the bed by tapping the top of my head with her finger. I meekly fell back into my bed and glared at her hand. She was never able to push me over that easily before.

“It's fine. You don't need to get up,” she said. “Just tell me.”

I could hear her voice shaking. Even though I told her not to talk about it. Not to mention it. Not to speak about it. Not to even hint at it. She was always a person who was loud about her emotions, so I knew it would be hard for her, but I couldn't help it. Sorry.

“The box next to my bed,” I said.

I pointed at the box full of cranes under my bed. She looked at me with confusion in her eyes.

“It’s not like I’m going to have much use for it now,” I said.

She gave me a blank look, and I to her. Silence engulfed the room.

“Will you stay?” I asked in a quiet voice.

“Mm-hm.”

“For how long?”

“Mmm.”

“That’s not an answer,” I laughed hurt

She didn’t answer.

Our gazes drifted across the room, occasionally meeting. Her focus was mostly on my left, and the clock, but I refused to look there, so I looked out the window instead.

I heard footsteps outside the door, and the door opened. My friend and I both looked at the newcomer, and it was that guy from before. The stranger whose name I didn’t know. The guy who showed her in when she brought me the paper. I didn’t know his name so I planned to ask for it later.

“You have to go now,” he said to no one in particular. His gaze went straight past me and my friend and right out the window.

“Now?” I asked.

He nodded and walked over to me and started moving my bed. My friend glared at him with a gaze full of malice. I’ll ask him for his name later. I reminded my friend to take the box of cranes.

“We made it together so maybe we both get half a wish?” I said.

Her gaze bounced between me and the box.

“You can’t wish for that you know,” I said. I knew what she was thinking.

She grimaced and I gave her my brightest smile. She closed her eyes, and so did I.

“What do you want me to wish for?” She barely croaked out a question.

“You already know.”