

Orikata

He was old. After his death that was the only wholly true thing said about him. People would say that he was kind and wise, as people are wont to do when speaking of the dead, but he was slightly less wise than most, even on the best of days, and he was only as kind as years of painful, creaking bones and blackened lungs permitted him to be.

But he made dragons, and, for that reason, the girl wept when he passed and was crying now as she sat across from his casket in the funeral home, adults—most of them decrepit and trembling—looking at her curiously as they walked by his body and brushed the thin hands folded across his chest. “What’s that girl doing here?” they seemed to be thinking. “Have we seen her before?” They hadn’t.

The girl—Rachel was her name—had never seen the Old Man’s friends. In fact, she never imagined him having any large number of acquaintances in the first place: In her mind at least, the only company he truly needed was that of the dragons. Her cheeks turned red under his friends’ gazes and she fidgeted with the crumpled tissue in her hands until it was in shreds. Her lap was covered in fine, papery dust.

From her skirt pocket, she took a sheet of thin green paper, creasing it with her callused fingers, folding over and under, unfolding, careful not to tear the fragile material. After a moment it was complete: a paper bird. It looked like a songbird—a warbler, or maybe a finch. It stood steadily on tiny paper feet in her palm. The bird was simple, one of the first animals he taught her to craft, but she thought that the Old Man would appreciate the gesture.

Rachel sat there in the funeral home with the paper bird and waited for the right time. The solitary clock—a grandfather clock—in the back of the room ticked incessantly, a loud and hollow sound, the bell chiming once to mark the new hour. Eventually, the adults went to form tight-knit circles out in the yard around their beat down cars and trucks. Only one man remained, sitting in the front row across the aisle from her.

She glanced over at him occasionally, willing him to leave. He didn't, and she decided that one man's presence wouldn't make any difference that mattered. Passing the bright wreaths of violets and roses, she made her way to the casket and placed the bird next to his hands, reaching out to touch them as some of the adults had done. Her quivering hand only hovered in the air above his body, and she soon pulled it away.

Gripping the side of the casket, she stood and stared down at him, studied his face. He'd been put in a suit she hadn't seen before, that looked as though it hadn't been worn for years, and his wrinkled features had been set in a peaceful expression.

“You've been here awhile.”

She jumped at the voice and turned to see the man standing beside her, hands in suit pockets, his pale eyes turned away, scanning over the flowers.

Rachel kept her head down, her fingers drumming against the coffin's silky lining. “I was waiting to be alone,” she explained, glancing over at the man as he stood there, eyes on violets and not on her.

“So you could put that there?” he asked after a moment, nodding toward the bird.

“Yeah,” she said hesitantly. “He likes birds, paper ones I mean. He made them sometimes.”

“Really?” The man picked up the bird and held it lightly in his palm, looking at it intently before putting it back. “How did you know him?”

“He . . . he’s my teacher, my art teacher.”

“He teaches then?”

“No, just me,” she said, then, for what she told herself was out of politeness but what was more accurately spurred by sheer confusion, she asked, “Do—*did* you know him?”

“No, but he’s my father.”

She looked at him. His expression hadn’t changed, and she bit down on her bottom lip, her face going red again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Sorry for what?”

“That you didn’t know him.”

“I didn’t, but I don’t see why *you* should be sorry.”

She decided the best thing to say was absolutely nothing, and the Old Man’s son answered with silence of his own. The funeral home made the creaks and groans of an old building settling, and the grandfather clock ticked. Ticked. Ticked.

She left the son alone. He was standing by the stranger in the casket and plucking the petals off an aster flower, letting them drop to the floor.

* * *

The dragons in the Old Man's home would be dead, and so would the birds and the butterflies and the horses. He had been seen through his office window, hunched over his working desk, a churchgoing woman who brought the elderly of the town breakfast each Saturday finding him cold and long gone: a natural death. It wasn't a surprise.

Rachel often imagined him sitting there, late at night with a desk lamp fixed on his hands as they folded the thick stationery paper that he hadn't used to write letters (or to do anything remotely sociable) for quite some time. She couldn't picture what he was making. In her mind, he collapsed before it was completed, just a distorted piece of paper, bent and creased beyond usage, the beginnings of some never-to-be-born thing.

And all the animals would fall lifeless to the ground with him. Cranes and owls abruptly ceasing the flapping of their paper wings, horses and pigs struck mid-trot on pointed feet; all of them ceasing to be anything more than the lifeless bits of paper that the rest of the world saw them to be. When the churchwoman arrived, she would have found them all littering the floor of his home, and she would have marveled at the sheer number of them, how ubiquitous they were. They were dead, and Rachel wondered if she could bring them to life again. If it was possible, the Old Man never taught her how.

* * *

Rachel's mother worked in an office, doing something that involved tremendous amounts of red ink and frequent trips to office supply stores for calculators and the like. She never asked what exactly her mother did, and her mother never offered to tell her, and their nightly conversations went well. "Are you going to your teacher's funeral, dear?" she asked.

“No. I went to the showing today.”

“And that’s good enough for you?”

“It’s good enough for me.”

Her mother sighed, in the way that only a mother can do, but she didn’t protest. “Dinner’s soon,” she said simply, turning back to her desk, red pen in hand and blonde hair pulled up out of her face. Rachel nodded, but her mother didn’t see.

She kept her door locked and opened it by wedging a butter knife into the tumbler. The paint had chipped away in the space between the knob and doorframe for this reason, and she had promised to repaint it for some time but had yet to see the point in doing so. After opening her door, the animals resting peacefully on her shelves and on top of her dresser sprung to life. The room hummed with the sounds of rustling paper bodies as they twirled drunkenly through the air or clicked across the hardwood floor. She held out her palm and a sky blue pelican rested there before taking flight again.

Careful not to step on any of the creatures scurrying around her feet, Rachel made her way to her dresser, which also functioned as a desk, and sat cross-legged on the squeaking piano bench in front of it. A quickly dwindling stack of multi-colored paper was placed meticulously neat and straight in the right corner of her makeshift desk, and a pile of dishearteningly half-finished dragons in all colors took up the left.

She’d gone through the Chinese Zodiac. Pigs and oxen, dogs and sheep, tigers and rabbits: all of them were running around somewhere in her bright little room. But it was a room bereft of dragons, and it felt emptier that way. The Old Man had shown her once before he died how to craft the creature he favored most, but not in time for her to

remember all the correct steps. She'd gotten close, but "close" only translated to "nothing."

She started again, taking a piece of orange paper and going through the motions that she remembered, her brow furrowed. Eventually, and inevitably, she was lost. As she pinched the paper between her fingers, it was enough to cause her nails, bitten down low and uneven, to bleed, staining the would-be dragon. Rachel sighed, flattened out the paper on the edge of the dresser, and folded it into a bloodied ladybug. She held it in her cupped hands, and breathed the life into it the way she was taught to. She sucked on her bleeding fingers as it fluttered up to join the others.

* * *

The Old Man was sitting in his window and folding a dragon when she first saw him. The sun was low in the sky, low enough for her to see through the glass, and she watched the dragon flutter up and out of his hands. The Old Man smiled up at it and was reaching for another piece of paper when he spotted her. "What are you doing out there?" he yelled weakly, coughing. He rushed outside on trembling legs to apprehend her, but she was already gone.

The next morning Rachel stood at the Old Man's door—awkward, arms crossed and fingers drumming restlessly against her skin. She'd knocked a long time ago, and for a long time there was no answer. But eventually the door opened, just slightly, revealing the Old Man's face—wrinkled and angry—and a frayed robe that wasn't always gray. "What do you want?"

Rachel looked up at him, wide-eyed, biting her lip. “I . . . I saw . . . you made that bird *fly*,” she finally stammered out, looking down at her feet.

“I didn’t. And girls aren’t supposed to go snooping around their neighbors’ yards.”

“I wasn’t,” she retorted. “I lost a soccer ball. It’s still in the bushes over there by the window.”

“Then go get it and leave. You didn’t see anything.”

“I *saw* it.” She noticed the sound of rustling behind him, glimpsed the paper wings of a bird flash over his balding head before he shoed it away. She craned her neck to see more, but he pushed her away and shut the door with a thud. “*Please*,” she said through the door. “I just want to know how you did it.”

The Old Man reappeared after a moment. “Are you going to get off my porch?” he asked.

“No.”

His lips were a thin line, and his jaw quivered. “Then it was a dragon,” he said curtly. “Not a bird.”

“And you made it fly?”

He looked at her with watery eyes and said nothing, just opened the door wider and gestured impatiently for her to come inside. She was met by a flurry of paper wings and feet, and she gasped, reaching out timidly to touch them. A cream-colored crane brushed across her shaking fingers and landed to rest lightly on her hand for a moment.

“That’s a bird,” the Old Man said. “Get the newspaper, will you. It’s still out by the door. Make sure none of them get out.”

She did as she was asked, and she went home later that day with a crudely crafted crane in her jacket pocket, the soccer ball forgotten in the bushes.

* * *

The funeral was in the morning, when the grass was still wet, and the air was still cool. “Are you sure you don’t want to go today?” her mother asked, red pen tapping against the kitchen table, a slice of toast half-eaten beside her work.

“I’m sure.”

Another sigh—the motherly kind. “I’m going to work then. Are you sure you don’t want me to drop you off there?”

“Yeah.”

Rachel heard the car on the gravel driveway. Red ink had leaked through her mother’s papers onto the table, and she’d forgotten her toast. Rachel finished her breakfast slowly, the cereal turning into flavorless mush before she was done. She tried folding a napkin into a dragon and quickly abandoned the task, leaving it on the table as she slipped on her shoes and made her way outside, finishing the toast before she went through the front door.

* * *

Rachel’s town was a drowsy place—stores with bright windows and few customers. She sped past them: past the antique shop with the rocking horse outside the front door, past the little bookstore that seemed to be perpetually closed. She passed the

church as well, a whitewashed and chapel-less building with a hearse waiting solemnly in the parking lot.

Pausing across the street, she wondered if she should go in just to see if the songbird had been left undisturbed in his coffin. But she wasn't dressed for a funeral, and she turned around the corner, glancing back many times. The Old Man's son was strolling down the sidewalk ahead of her, hands in pockets, and she sped up to meet him. "Isn't the funeral today?" she called from behind him.

He stopped and waited for her, waving. "It is today, isn't it?" she repeated.

"It's still going on. I just left. Shouldn't you be there?" he asked, eyes following the single car rattling down the street.

"I'm not going. Shouldn't *you* be there?"

"I don't see why I should be." He was wearing his suit from the showing, and it was wrinkled around the shoulders.

"You're his son."

"Not really."

Rachel bit down on her fingernails, not willing to reply, drops of blood welling slowly on the tips of her fingers. "Are you hungry?" she asked, balling her hand into a fist. The son said yes.

* * *

Rachel and the Old Man's son sat on the sidewalk outside the town's only grocery store, a mom-and-pop place, eating yellow apples from a flimsy plastic bag and tossing the cores into the grass. She objected to it at first, but the son said that maybe an apple

tree would grow, and she was fond of the idea. “Why’d you leave early?” she asked quietly.

He shrugged, his suit jacket crumpled up in between them. “I already told you.”

“If you didn’t want to be there, why’d you go?”

“I guess I just thought I should.” He turned an apple over in his hands, looking at it blankly. “I was wrong. No one there had anything to say.”

“Say about what?”

“Him. They didn’t say anything about him I haven’t heard before anyway.”

Rachel just nodded and picked the seeds out of another apple core, counting them in her palm and stuffing them into her pocket. “I wouldn’t know what to say about him either.”

“I don’t think anyone really does,” the son said. He took a pocketknife from his pocket and whittled into the apple, juice running over his hands and slivers of white and yellow peppering the ground and landing on his shoes.

“What’re you making?” she asked, grateful for the chance to change the subject.

“Not sure,” the son said after a moment, holding the apple out for her to see. “It didn’t really turn out how I wanted it to,” he added sheepishly.

There was a face carved into the side, crude and sharp edged, parts of it already turning brown in the open air. It reminded her of the faces people found staring out from tree bark or chipping paint. “It’s a little creepy looking, like those shrunken heads you get on Halloween.”

“I guess I can say that’s what I was going for.” He bit into it, half the face gone, and handed her the knife. “You want to try?”

“I don’t feel like slicing open my fingers.”

He glanced over at her, smirking, and folded the knife, laying it on the sidewalk, and Rachel watched as tiny black ants began to appear from cracks in the pavement, swarming around the apple peelings and trying to carry them away.

The son rose to his feet, his bones popping, and asked to be alone. Rachel walked home, and tossed the apple seeds in her front yard, wondering if anything would grow. Going back inside, she sat at the kitchen table and tried carving pears into seashells and theatre masks, waiting for her mother to return. She was late that night.

* * *

Rachel biked past the Old Man’s home each day, blonde hair flying, usually going nowhere but away from her own lonely house, leaving the animals to run through the rooms while her mother was gone. His home was low and dark, with lanterns strung up in the surrounding trees, and dandelions growing uncontrolled in the yard, and kudzu climbing up the sidewall. There was a car parked in the driveway, and she stopped, skidding across the pavement and nearly tumbling off headfirst.

She walked her bike up to the office window but saw no one, then crept around the side of the house, past the vines and through an empty garden, to the back door. The path leading up to it was overgrown with clover, and the key was hidden under a garden gnome with no nose or ears. She opened the door with a loud click and an even louder

shriek of wood, and she cringed, quickly peeking her head through the threshold to see if anyone would come. No one did.

The inside of the Old Man's home smelled of old books and cigarette smoke intermixed with that strange, omnipresent odor that lingered around all elderly people. The back room was dark, and she could hear the clock in his kitchen ticking. She took a step forward, her foot falling on a piece of paper, and she looked down to see that it was a dead swan. She scooped it up and stuffed it in her jacket pocket.

Rays of dusty sunlight peaked through cracks in the blinds, illuminating her way. Going further into the house, she saw that the carpet, the furniture, everything was littered with the dead. There was a dragon perched lifelessly on the arm of a sagging, threadbare couch, and she put it with the swan. She tried and failed not to step on the rest of them. Pausing in his office, her eyes wandered to the desk, but there was nothing of interest there. No half-finished creature like she imagined, just completely finished dead ones.

“Are you allowed to be here?”

She flinched at the sound. The son stood in the doorway, a black garbage bag hung over his shoulder. He looked different without a suit, younger, though he was still closer to forty than thirty, and there were shadows under his eyes.

“I don't know,” she said. “I had a key though.”

“Did you come to get something?” The garbage bag shifted shoulders, and his eyes wandered over her head, looking out the window.

“No,” Rachel answered, sitting on the edge of the desk, arms crossed. “I saw your car up front.”

“You could’ve knocked, and I would’ve let you in.”

“I didn’t know it was you.”

“You do now, and if you’re going to be here, you might as well help me clean up.” The son walked back to the front room, crunching over the dead things.

Rachel looked away and tried biting her thumbnail, but it was wrapped with Scotch tape to gainsay the habit, like all nine of the others. She bit her lip instead and said okay to the empty room.

* * *

The Old Man’s son lived an hour away, in a bustling not-quite-city on the state’s border. He said that there was a spot marked where you could stand and be in two states at once. He thought that the Old Man had been dead for years, and he adjusted to the fact that his father actually *was* dead very quickly and very easily. For him nothing of great importance had changed, but, being next of kin, he was notified accordingly. It was his task now, emptying the house.

“I’m guessing he taught you origami,” he said jokingly, tossing a handful of paper birds into the trash bag. “Unless he has another house full of paintings I don’t know about.”

Rachel cringed every time he crunched over the creatures and tossed them away with the rest of the trash, but she managed a meek smile whenever he glanced over at her

(which wasn't often), and that was enough. "He said paper was the best way to make things. Nothing was closer to perfect."

"Do you agree with that?"

"I think I do." Her hands were in her pockets, and her taped-up fingers brushed the swan's wing and traced over the shape of the dragon.

"You think you do?"

"Yeah."

He held a pig in his palm and gazed at it for a moment, turned it over in his hands. "I prefer clay," he said, letting the pig join all the others in the bag. "It's really the only thing I'm good at—making Halloween decorations notwithstanding."

"Carving's harder than it looks," Rachel said. "I tried it when I got home and failed miserably."

The son smiled at that, but didn't reply. "These are nice too, in a different way," he said eventually. "I kept one of each, or at least I *think* one of each. There's really nothing to do with the rest though."

"I guess not," she mumbled. "So you're an artist too?"

"And starving, like most of them."

"I'm sorry."

He looked at her crossly, but caught his tongue and turned away for a moment to toss a horse into the bag before tying it up at the top. "Take this out front, will you?" he said, tossing her the bag, seemingly full of nothing but paper. "God, there are so many of these things."

* * *

Rachel dropped the trash bag onto the porch with the cardboard boxes holding rusted tools and the moldy, splintered baskets overflowing with things miscellaneous and broken. She sat down on the top step, the peeling wood warm and her arms wrapped around her knees. Real butterflies danced past, and songbirds and cicadas were making a joyous racket in the trees.

The sun was directly overhead, and she took out the swan to look at it in the light. It was dirty and crushed-looking, and she refolded the wings in a futile attempt to help it recover. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and tried to give it its life back, but it sat lopsided and inert in her palm. She tried for several minutes, then, thinking that perhaps it was simply too damaged to be saved, she took out the dragon and tried to rejuvenate it. It remained a dead piece of paper as well.

With the swan and the dragon resting at her sandaled feet, she started to cry, tears rolling coolly down her cheeks. She sat there, like at the Old Man's showing, crying and staring ahead, and she didn't notice when the swan and the dragon were blown off the steps in the breeze. She heard the footsteps and creaking, and she felt the weight shift as the son sat down next to her on the stoop, but she didn't turn to look at him. She rested her chin on her knees and listened to his breathing and his fingers drumming against the steps and the animals' singing until the tears stopped.

“Do you know they were alive?” she asked.

“What?” The drumming stopped.

“The animals—the paper ones. They were alive.”

“I’m sure they were,” the son said slowly, moving to put his hand on her shoulder but thinking better of it, looking off toward the road. He could see the heat rising off it.

“They were,” she snapped, wiping her eyes with her jacket sleeves. “They were.”
No answer.

“I don’t know anything I can do to make you feel any better,” the son said after a moment.

“It’s okay.” She wiped her eyes again, her face feeling raw.

“I wish I knew.”

Rachel nodded. “I don’t think there’s anything to do really. I can’t bring any of them back.”

“What?”

“I told you they were alive,” Rachel said. “I can show you!” she added, springing to her feet and rummaging through the junk behind them, eventually coming across an old newspaper, still rolled and damp around the edges.

“What do you mean?” he said, turning his head to look at her, his eyebrows raised.

“Just look.” She sat beside him again, cross-legged, and tore the most accurate square possible out of the sports page, along the lines of an ad for sun block. She folded and creased and created the bird, a songbird like the one she’d placed in the Old Man’s coffin. It was ruffled and rugged, but when she held it in her palm and gave it life, it began to flutter and bounce, ethereal wings beating quickly to fight against the breeze.

The son just stared at it, openmouthed for a moment before breaking into a slight smile. She showed him how to hold his hand out, flat, like he was feeding a horse, so the bird

could light on his palm. “And to think I spent so much time with clay,” he said quietly, grinning and cupping the paper bird in his hands, watching as he set it free in the air again.

The two of them stood on the porch until the sun was low in the sky, watching the songbird dart and swivel above their heads. Occasionally, it would pass by Rachel’s eyes, and she would be able to catch a glimpse of the newsprint on its body—just single words blinking past. “Summer.” “Waves.” “Victory.”

* * *

“You’re folding under. It’s *in*, not *under*,” Rachel said, smirking and impatient.

“That’s what I did.”

“No it wasn’t. I’ll show you.” She took the newspaper from the son’s hand and folded in what would soon be the wings. “See?”

“Not really.” He took it back and looked it over.

They were sitting in the living room on the carpeted floor, all the animals cleared away and giving the place an empty look. Between them, the newspaper pages were spread out and cut into squares with the scissors she scrounged up from the kitchen. Her cranes were fluttering overhead; his were awkward balls of crumpled newsprint at his feet.

“Maybe you should just see if it works with clay,” she said as the paper ripped in his hands again. “It might work. He never said it wouldn’t, but I never thought to try before.”

The son tossed the botched trial away and started another one. “Maybe,” he mumbled, a frown of concentration on his face as he made the first creases, the ones he remembered

now, after so many tries. “But paper does seem better—at least for this. I don’t think a clay bird would be able to fly.”

“It might,” Rachel said, watching his hands fumble over the paper again as she worked on another songbird.

“My father, he never did anything else?” he asked after a moment, holding the crane close to his eyes, folding carefully.

She looked over at the son, who might have resembled the Old Man in the right light but didn’t now, and then back to her lap, her fingers tracing over the words on the songbird’s body as she turned it over in her hands. “What do you mean?”

“Those people at the showing didn’t know him very well. And this place . . . it seems like he didn’t leave often. I don’t think he did much besides this.” He held his crane in front of him, completed, and looked down at it.

“I don’t know what he did.”

“You knew him better than me.”

“I only knew one thing about him. And it was this.”

They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the hum of paper wings in the air. The son cupped the crane in his hands, his eyes closed as he breathed out and the bird drifted down from his fingers and was eventually able to fly up to the ceiling in lurching, uneven flight.

“This is good enough,” he said, reaching for another square of paper. “For now, at least..”