

The Last Chapters of Tsuru Nyōbō

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Prologue

This story is intended to be a creative ending to a Japanese folklore, "Tsuru no Ongaeshi" (Crane's obligation to repay a debt of kindness) and its variation, "Tsuru Nyōbō". The tale is about a poor woodcutter who, one day, rescues a crane from a hunter's trap. Few days later, a beautiful woman comes to his doorstep and asks him to marry her. They get married, but undergo hardships as they are very poor. The wife requests him to buy her some yarn so that she could make some fabric. She extracts a promise from him that he would not look into the room while she is weaving. She weaves the most beautiful silk brocade that fetches the woodcutter a lot of money. The news about the unbelievable fabric reaches the emperor and he demands that the woodcutter sell him one silk brocade every month. The wife agrees to weave, so that her husband need not dishonor the emperor. Every month, the woodcutter receives large sums of money but at the same time he notices his wife grow paler and weaker. Out of curiosity, the woodcutter peeks into her room one day, only to see a winged creature, half woman and half crane, working at the loom, plucking and using her feathers to weave the cloth. She catches him peeking and laments that he broke his promise. She, then, transforms into a beautiful crane and flies away never to return. Although no longer poor, the woodcutter lives alone, heartbroken for the rest of his life.

Chapter 1: Remorse

Toshirō stepped out of his house and peered into the vastness before him. Millions of dusty flakes of snow were busily deciding whether to touch the earth and disappear into the wet, dark mud or return to the heavens whence they came. The sun was on the verge of retiring for the day and like a last gasp, thick yellowness filled the sky that was engorged with menacing, gray clouds. Toshirō's house was on the mound that overlooked the lake. Now, there was always a question whether it was a lake or a pond. There are differences between things. Lake versus pond, bird versus girl. The differences makes them unique. The differences keeps the world continue in it's state of conventionality. Then there are similarities between different things. The similarities makes it confusing to discern lake from pond, bird from girl. The similarities breaks order, breaks routine and breaks hearts. Usually a lake is that which is deep and a pond shallow. A lake is relatively bigger than a pond. As the pond is shallow, marshes and plants take root in the fertile soil below and benefit from the sunlight as well. The lake before Toshirō's dwelling was vast, sometimes deep but busy with marshes and floating lotus plants. So, some called it a lake and others called it a pond.

Exactly forty nine winters had come and gone since Tsuru left. This day was the winter solstice, the first day of the fiftieth winter without her. Flakes of snow gently touched Toshirō's face as he slowly turned around and shifted his stare from the lake to the oppressive sulfurous sky above the bamboo forest behind his house. It was time for the last of the birds to fly south. He stood frozen, gaze fixated in the direction where he knew the birds would come into sight. He knew exactly. It was a ritual that has been going on for half a century, with hope that would never die and love that would never wane. A slow wind was managing to whistle up a tune through the thick bamboo forest. The uncertain scurry of the little snowflakes and the whimsical swaying of the bamboo leaves proved that the wind had no reason or direction. But Toshirō had both reason and direction. He stood there unperturbed by the hustle of the wind, rustle of the leaves and bustle of the snowflakes. Like every year, his mind was filled with questions that began with "What if", "Why did" and "Would she". Remorse, Grief and Hope.

It would've been an hour or more or less, the birds appeared in the distance. Toshirō's eyes squinted myopically as the flock advanced from the tall pines behind the bamboo forest, soared over his house and flew across the lake. More than twenty beautiful cranes with red crowns, slender white necks, dark legs and outstretched wingtips. Toshirō's heart lit up with joy and sunk with sorrow. As much as he was happy to see the cranes fly by, he was sad that she didn't stop for him this time too. They slowly disappeared from view like his happiness.

Cranes are the most special of all birds. Unlike other birds, cranes do not age. They remain young throughout their lifespan which is more than two thousand years. After the first thousand years, they slowly turn blue and after two thousand years, they turn black. They would marry only once and remain faithful to their partners throughout their lives. Silk cranes are woven into a bride's obi and kimono symbolizing loyalty. Cranes are pretty graceful. When they dance, dreams come true. Love of joy and

celebration of life. They sway and spin, their soft and showy feathers swaying along their movement. They lift up from the ground, whirl with their wings moving downwards first and then sideways, and float down effortlessly and weightlessly to the ground. They have music in their minds accompanying their elegant performance. Music they learned several thousand years ago when the Kami created birds and animals to accompany humans.

Tsuru did not promise she would come back. It was just Toshirō's final request before she departed.

“You broke your promise. You have seen me half-crane half-woman. My spirit wouldn't allow me anymore to live with someone who has seen me in my true form,” she had said.

Toshirō pleaded, “I know I made a mistake and I would be ever repentant for that. But my love for you is true. Please do not leave me.”

With tears in her eyes, Tsuru replied, “Neither I doubt your love for me, nor should you doubt my love for you. Nature binds us with rules that shall not be broken, the rule that I protected by a promise from you. Whenever you would look at me, your heart will fence inadvertently to see me as a woman or as a bird, for you have seen who I am and I am both a bird and a woman in your eyes now. The line has been crossed and the differences have been blurred.”

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Tsuru continued, “I will be forever thankful to you for saving me from the trap, and please remember that I will always love you. But I would have to leave now.” With these words, she transformed fully into a beautiful crane.

Toshirō, in his immense sadness, couldn't find the right words to say. All he could muster up was, “Will I get one more chance to see you before I die?” With a shuffle of feathers and flutter of wings, she flew out of the house and disappeared into the sky. Toshirō couldn't tell if she heard his last plea.

Chapter 2: Grief

Toshirō stood there continuing his gaze over the lake for a few minutes. The sun had set and darkness engulfed the town on the other side of the lake. Lamps adorned the houses and streetlights. Iridescent yellow pearls on a flatly laid out string on the edge of the lake. Mostly poor fisherfolk lived there. Men usually spent their evenings drinking at the only watering hole in town, singing songs of the past. Women were at home cooking rice and fish, and taking care of the children. All the bustling condensed into small flickering yellow-orange summaries soon to be curtained by snow.

On this side of the lake, there weren't any inhabitants other than Toshirō. The last of them left to the other side around five or six years ago. Yaoya had begged Toshirō to move with him to the other side. Though he was Toshirō's best, last and only friend, his appeals did not succeed. Toshirō told him that if he leaves this place, he will lose her forever. The house was regarded as Tsuru's temple in his mind. Yaoya knew Toshirō very well and even though Toshirō's reasoning did not make sense to him, he just agreed with his friend. He made sure that he visited Toshirō every

other day and brought him fruits or vegetables or rice from the other side. Though it was not expected, Toshirō would share the catch of the day with Yaoya in return.

Toshirō's stare was broken by a knocking sound from the shore below the mound. His fishing boat which had been tethered by a rope to a stump had come undone and was moving away from the beach. Without haste, he slowly turned around, walked towards his house, picked up the lantern from the engawa and proceeded towards the steps. The large stone steps, that led down the mound towards the beach, were dark and steep, their gaps filled with thick moss decorated by delicately balanced snowflakes. He knew the steps so well, he could climb down eyes closed. But today he felt old and weak, he felt the need for support. He missed her so deeply, his grief surpassed hope. His heart pounded like a drum by the time he reached the last step. He stopped for a minute to regain his breath and then, proceeded towards the shore. The skiff hadn't drifted much and some form of a contorted knot was still holding on to the wet stump.

Toshirō laid the lantern down, stepped out of his wooden sandals and walked towards the mooring. The gravel was wet and freezing cold. It made squishy sounds as he stepped on them. He tardily bent down, picked up the rope and undid the loose knot from the post. He tugged at it with all the little strength he had and secured a good length of the rope on his side. He made two loops around the deteriorating stump and slid the tail through the slack in the loops to make the first half of the knot. He proceeded to go around the standing end of the rope to make the second half hitch and pulled as hard as he could to complete the knot. The exertion made him feel light-headed when he tried to stand. The tugging had moved the boat closer towards him and he decided quickly to rest for a minute in his boat before heading back. He was so dizzy and weak that he stumbled into it like it was his first time boarding a boat. He felt the lake and land around him turn and merge with one another. He lost balance on the rocking boat and fell back with a thud. For some reason his body offered no resistance or reflex to fight the collapse. Facing the sky, he lay there with memories of a

short-lived love. A fleeting wisp of joy from the thoughts of her let an unnoticeable smile escape his lips. Magical white racing fluffs of snow filled his view as his eyes closed slowly.

Chapter 3: Hope

Toshirō felt a familiar warmth and scent when he opened his eyes. He was lying on his mat bed on the floor of his house. The lamps were lit. The last thing he remembered was collapsing in his boat and snow falling on his face. While he was wondering how he got home, he intuitively felt he was not alone at that moment. There was someone watching him. He turned and looked to his side. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was Tsuru sitting across the room.

“Tsuru?” he said.

“Yes my dear.”

“Is this a dream or is this reality?”

Dreams and reality are different things. And as long as they are different, as long as they can be told apart, everything is fine. There are times when dreams come true, like when a crane dances, and during those times, reality seems to lack credibility. It had been fifty years and Tsuru hadn't aged a day. If she were a woman, the likelihood of this would be only possible in a dream. But Tsuru was a crane and cranes, as we know, do not age. She was wearing

a white and pink silk kimono robe with hand-painted cherry blossoms. The sash was a darker pink and pretty thin. She sat in the well-mannered and respectful yokozuwari position, upright, one side of her hips supporting her weight, both legs to the left side and both palms resting on her knees.

“Your love for me and my love for you is real. I have come back for you. Isn't that what you wished for? All those years, all those seasons, not a day went by without thinking of you. It was a constant battle between the power of nature to keep things in order and the power of love to break that order,” said Tsuru.

“Those were the seasons to live. There were memories to be made. You could have come sooner,” Toshirō said in a tone that was weak and desperate.

“The decisions we make shapes the path our lives. Your decision separated us for fifty years. But my decision, to fall in love and live with a man, cost me an eternity of heartbreak. Many miles I have traveled, many lands I have seen. Many miles I have yet to travel, many lands yet to see. Many years before your time and many, many after that. What was bestowed upon as a blessing on our kind, do you realize how it has turned into a curse for me? You grieve for fifty years of your life. What should I do for the thousands of years of mine?” Tears welled up in Tsuru's eyes. She continued, “It is not that I belittle your sorrow by foreboding the course of my future. It is not fair to compare grief.”

“Oh, the lives we lived with these little instants of happiness. Like trees in a barren land waiting for that occasional rain. I've turned old and my body is failing, but I am grateful that at last my prayers to see you again and my wish to be forgiven have been granted. I just want to lie on your lap, forget time and pain, and rest like there is no tomorrow.”

“I wouldn't love anything more than that,” she replied with deep love in her deep loving eyes.

Tsuru stood up and walked towards the mat bed. Toshirō felt like he was transported back in time. Tsuru looked exactly the same and just as beautiful after all these years. Her curves reminded him of a swan and her color, the petals of the water lilies.

She offered her hand to help him get up. With effort, Toshirō lifted himself and reached out to take her hand. His hand was wrinkled and calloused, while her's was almost translucent and flawless. Tsuru quickly but gracefully knelt beside him and used her other hand to support him from beneath. He leaned over her and he could smell the familiar mild aroma of ume, the intoxicating scent of the plum blossoms. The promise of spring. His arms brushed over her shapely breasts which were as soft as down, his shoulders gently sunk by the edge of her legs and the silky kimono, and with a little more help from her, his head rested sideways on her warm lap. It was all her, it was no dream.

“How long would this last?” he sighed.

“Forever” she whispered and gently combed through his gray hair with her thin fingers.

Toshirō felt at home. He felt secure, he felt complete. He closed his eyes and slept like there was no tomorrow.

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Yaoya was the first to reach this side of the lake during the early hours of the morning. Part of his normal routine, he had brought a large bright cabbage, a bag of bitter melons and some lotus roots. He found his best friend dead and frozen in his boat.

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