

## **ONE THOUSAND CRANES**

By Judah Dabora

A man had departed to the Vietnamese jungle. He was a good man. His people had instilled in him the American values of duty, honour, and charity.

Over the barrel of the good soldier's gun, the mother was hunched over her child. The bullets, he knew, would tear through them like rice paper. She should let the kid get away (*the kid, oh god*) but stupidly she quavered and hunched and clung tightly.

The enemy were almost upon him. He imagined the whacking of jungle leaves and the drumming feet. He saw their dark painted faces; the thin machetes that had slid from behind into his comrade's kidney.

He made a decision.

His knuckles were white on the gun as he -

- shattered with his arched back the blood-warm pool by the backyard fort and screamed in a ten-year-old's delight. The air was like mulled wine spiced with pine-sap. His mother brought frosty lemonade and chocolate biscuits which the youths feasted on. She supervised them over the pages of a book as they leaped between the trunks of tall trees and crunched the dappled carpet of needles. When his friends were gone, he helped her with the dishes.

That night, instead of a story, she brought squares of coloured paper into his room. "Remember this?" Her deft hands wove the paper into a graceful crane. The boy imitated her, and produced a puddle. His brow scrunched in irritation, and he decided to leave the making to his mother, bending the wings of her first crane to make a fighter jet. She folded another. "If you can fold a thousand cranes," she told him, "you get to make a wish."

A memory surfaced. "Daddy says wishing is good n' all, but it takes sweat to get anything done."

A smile. "Daddy is mostly right."

They folded in silence for a while. The soft glow of the bedside lamp turned the paper into a pocked, lunar landscape. The boy expertly folded a space dog which vaguely resembled a failed crane. He smushed it into the nose of the fighter jet.

"Did you ever fold a thousand cranes?"

"Lots of times."

"And did you get anything done?"

"Well, I made some stuff. Some dumb stuff."

"Like what?"

"...Like you."

They laughed and he pretended to strangle her.

"Did you wish for daddy to save you, back in Japan?" he asked, as she untangled his hands from her neck. There was a brief tightening of her hand on his. "No – I didn't know him then."

The boy absorbed himself in another crane until he realised his mother wasn't folding them with him. She had the weird look on her face, the one she got sometimes when

she thought about her life in Japan, before daddy's unit had saved her from the bad men that took her family away. Daddy never told him where they'd taken the family to. Once the boy had asked daddy who the bad men were. He hadn't really received an answer. Instead daddy had started talking about how some people didn't think he should be with mommy, because of her accent and narrow eyes. The boy remembered daddy getting the tough voice he'd used when the boy had broken the window with his air rifle. Except this time he didn't know what daddy was angry at. Daddy said the people who thought things like that lacked intellect (whatever that was) and said if you want to judge a man, you had to do so by his character. This didn't make sense, because mommy was a woman. The boy thought daddy said a lot of things that didn't make sense.

With a jolt he noticed his mother's hands twisting and tearing at the crane she had been working on. Her eyes, still staring at the wall, had become red and wet. She looked down at the boy's unsatisfactory attempts then stood suddenly. "That's enough for tonight," she said flatly, and in a moment the room was empty and cold. The boy got up and closed the door. He looked angrily at the cranes which had distressed his mother and, with a sudden movement, swept the lifeless paper figures into the trash.

\*

In the second for which the good soldier had known the mother and her child, he felt as if time had ceased to move forward. If the mother told the enemy the direction he was headed in, they'd find him. They'd find the troop. Butchery. His duty was to his men. The blood rushed in his ears. His brain was white noise. The world around the kneeling figure was a green smear, yet she herself was rendered in excruciating focus. She couldn't have been older than twenty-five.

The soldier's finger paused on the trigger, gun shuddering between his clenched hands. Through his head the deadly thoughts spiralled --

the enemy  
    the troop  
        the cranes

-- and then the world accelerated back into chaotic motion, and the soldier sent three bullets through the woman's spine. The figures folded like paper, the red tape hissing out, crumpling between callous metal hands, and then they were behind him, the jungle leaves were whipping at his face, the green and brown blurring past. His panting heartbeat drowned out the world. The mother and child had passed through his life in less than a second. He would never forget the squeezed shut eyes, the tufts of soft toddler hair poking between her fingers...and the lingering scent of blood which swam like soup between the dark leaves.

As the good soldier fled to his troop, he wondered desperately whether the mother had ever folded any cranes.