

Origami

I was twenty-four when I moved back into my parents' house, for the third time. They had renovated the basement of their considerably uncomfortable ranch-style home in the cookie-cutter suburbs of Franklin into a sort of apartment. My grandmother's health had declined to a point that she needed family nearby, not just in the same city but in the same house. There was conveniently an extra bedroom, and since I was returning to college it suited my budget to find a way to cut rent out of my expenses. So my grandmother and I became roommates.

We got along well. Although it was never stated out loud, it was no secret that I was her favorite grandson. Being the oldest and first of her grandchildren, I had the unfair advantage of three years to win her affections. My artistic talents manifested themselves even as a toddler, to her deepest delight. It was my ability to draw, as well as my interest in drawing, that won her heart.

"I always loved to paint," she'd tell me time after time, whenever the situation allowed. "I always loved to draw people, animals, and flowers. You know, I went to Murray State. I minored in art. If they'd have had a bachelors degree at the time, I wouldn't have become a teacher," which would have been tragic for Reidland; my grandmother taught for over thirty years, sometimes several grades at once. Her influence on the hundreds of children that were in her classes over those four decades was not unappreciated. As a child, visiting grandma meant that anywhere we went, a restaurant, store, or gas station, we would run into her former students. I loved the stories she would tell me about that particular student – if he was good, or rowdy, if he'd failed, or got along well with the other kids. It made me wonder what kind of impression I was making on my teachers, and if any of them would remember me when I was an adult.

But now as my roommate, my grandmother was no longer able to remember her students. Not selectively. She had recently begun confusing me for my father when I got home from work or classes, correcting herself, "Wait just a minute. Are you Bennett Lee..?"

"I'm Jason," I'd laugh with her, because I really did resemble my dad when he was my age. While these mistakes were becoming more frequent, they were also becoming more than just slight mistakes. My parents and I had done our best to pretend that she was as alert and aware as she'd always been, discounting as isolated incidents the obvious warning signs of dementia. Only two years ago she had been living alone in the house where she had spent the entirety of her marriage to my grandfather, who had recently passed away.

I sat with her one afternoon at her kitchen table. She had just finished eating some lunch. I cleared away the dishes, but she wanted to sit there for a bit. Her back was bothering her and it hurt too much to walk over to her T.V. chair. She was quiet, and I didn't feel like making small talk, so we just sat. I fiddled with some bits of paper, pieces of a straw wrapper, folding them and curling edges until there was a tiny piece of modern sculpture sitting in the middle of the table. Despite her back pain, she laughed.

As a child she had taught me how to fold paper squares into little bird shapes, swans and cranes and ducks. They were all variations of the same form, and while some

of them barely resembled birds by even the most generous stretch of the imagination, a few of them were proportioned well and even moved their wings up and down when the tail was pulled back and forth. It amused her to teach me such a thing; and I indulged her in the lessons, even though I preferred paper airplanes. They actually achieved flight, but the birds sat lifelessly on the table waiting for an inevitable migration to the garbage can.

“You always were good at that sort of thing,” she coughed. She said it in the same way that she always had complimented my drawing skills, but also in a way that sounded as if she might have been talking to someone else. She twisted, trying to rub her back against the chair, as if scratching an itch. She slid another small piece of straw wrapper over toward me.

“See what you can do with this one,” she said, eagerly watching as I twisted it into nothing special, just some curly-cue, but thrilling her just the same. Instead of laughing, she writhed, trying to reach behind her shoulder.

“Can you loosen this?” she moaned, irritated by the pain in her back, but also whatever was making her twist in her chair. It was the back piece of her bra. “Just undo it for me. It’s driving me crazy.”

I pulled the neck of her sweatshirt back, and unsnapped the bra for her. And even as I was sitting back down, this ninety-two year old woman with osteoporosis, arthritis, and the posture of a candy-cane began a Houdini act that I will never, ever forget. First she shifted her shoulder a little, and then shuffled her weight; a little move, and a little twist, and before I realized exactly what she was trying to accomplish, she pulled her bra out of her sweatshirt and set it on the table as some sort of centerpiece. “There!” she said, taking in a deep breath and sighing long and slow. But she was not punctuating her relief.

“There,” she pushed the undergarment toward me. “See what you can do with that one.”

I was unable to say anything, confused by the odd request.

“Go on,” she urged me, grinning like a child requesting a magic trick. “You can do it. Look what you did with those other two,” she pointed at the paper straw wrappers that were twisted and bent into two little pieces of playground equipment. And then she pointed at the crumpled, off-white brassiere that loomed over them, and me, and her, on the kitchen table. “Make something,” she clucked.

I made a swan.