**Paper Cranes**

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*Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.*

— J. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb

On August 9, 1945, the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki.

“People’s skin ripped off. It melted off their bones. It dangled off their bodies,” my Saturday Japanese school teacher said in the one serious lecture she gave the entire year. She sat crisscrossed on a blue plastic chair, one hand on her lap, the other holding a textbook. Her cigarette-damaged voice crackled out of her red-painted lips, sounding much more poised than usual. “People didn’t just burn. They disintegrated. They became shadows.”

In silent terror, I imagined the meaning of these words. I pictured everything in black and white—people like ghosts, their faces hollowed and skin sagging.

Yamaga Sensei wasn’t lying. The Human Shadow Etched in Stone, displayed at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, is a permanent black shadow burned into a slab of stone. The shadow’s owner was waiting on the steps of a bank when the bomb was dropped. The person became nothing, and this shadow is the only residue of their life.

From what I've learned in other Japanese history lectures, Nagasaki was a vibrant port city. During the Tokugawa shogunate’s complete isolation of Japan, Nagasaki’s Dejima was the only place where foreign merchants came to trade.

When the atomic bomb was dropped, this city and its people crumbled, burned, and decayed.

This is the pain that only Japanese people feel. It is the pain of a past not too far away, a pain that two generations cannot fix.

The atomic bomb on Hiroshima killed 140,000 by the end of 1945 and damaged or destroyed 70 percent of the city’s buildings. In Nagasaki, 74,000 people died by the end of the year. These deaths do not account for the thousands that died in later years of cancer or other effects of the bombings.

My second-grade teacher, Ms. Servous, had a bookshelf that spanned an entire wall of her room. From the myriad books, I picked out *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*.

The story is about a young girl named Sadako who loved to run. But, as she trained, she began to feel recurring spells of vertigo. Soon, she was diagnosed with leukemia from the radiation of the atomic bomb that killed her grandmother just a decade before.

Sadako didn’t want to die. Her friend told her that there is a Japanese legend that says that if you fold one thousand origami paper cranes, it will grant any wish. Wanting to be cured, Sadako started folding cranes on her hospital bed.

Unfortunately, Sadako did not reach a thousand paper cranes. She died the morning after she folded her 644th one.

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9 earthquake hit Japan.

The devastation came not just from the tremble but also from the tsunami that swallowed villages whole. After school that day, my mother told me in distraught that there had been a huge disaster back home.

“We have to pray,” she asserted.

The Japanese people are not religious. Religion is a way of life—people do not believe in religion; rather, it’s ingrained in our culture and customs. Just as one must bow to an elder or may not spoil a secret, one must pray to Shinto and Buddhist gods when the earth caves in.

I was eight and had just moved to America. I wrote in my diary that day:

*March 11 nichi 2011,*

*Today was a simple day. But one thing that was not good. In Japan there was and now too, a kind of big earthquake!!*

The earthquake was the fourth most powerful in recorded history, killing nearly 20,000 people. The earthquake pushed the planet 6.5 inches off its axis and Japan 4 meters closer to America. Nuclear power plants in Fukushima faced a meltdown, its radiation spilling into the once-peaceful Japanese countryside.

The Japanese people feel collectively. In Japan’s homogeneity, pain is also shared. The mothers of the Japanese students at Roberts Elementary came together and bought thousands and thousands of origami papers. They passed it out to the Japanese children, and to the American children and parents. Together, we hoped to fold a thousand paper cranes to be sent across the Pacific.

After dinner a week later, my family sat down to fold paper cranes.

I remembered the story about Sadako who tried folding a thousand cranes but died before she finished. I felt scared that if we failed like Sadako, the people climbing up those hills and waiting for the water to recede would die, too.

I quietly and intensely folded these cranes at the dining table. I folded until my fingers were tight and tired. I folded so that we’d have more paper cranes than Sadako, and so that my wish for everyone to be safe would come true.

*Someone must remember. And someone must tell.*

— Akira Kurosawa

Just a two-hour drive away from Nagasaki is my family’s home, Kumamoto. My grandparents’ towns were too rural to be touched by the devastation of the war. Instead, it hosted those fleeing from cities in hopes for survival. But still, Kumamoto is not sacred. It too was struck by a magnitude 7 earthquake in 2016 that killed dozens.

The Japanese, including my family, live with the knowledge of death. Whenever I return to Japan, I feel uncomfortably close to it—my grandparent’s house has a formal guest room lined with tatami mats that has a Buddhist altar on one end and a Shinto shelf on the other that both commemorate the once living.

Yet familiarity with death does not numb it.

The Buddhist altars and Shinto shrines are just a reminder of our mortality. The Japanese pray to Buddha and to kami and fold paper cranes when death is near. In these shared rituals we find hope. Together, we remember and mourn so that our stories are not forgotten but told.