

CARLOS PALANCA MEMORIAL AWARDS FOR LITERATURE 2013

“A THOUSAND PAPER CRANES”

Short Story For Children

## SYNOPSIS

An eleven year old girl named Faustina and her seamstress mother, Josephina from Silay City escapes to Fabrica, Sagay during the realm of the Japanese Occupation. In order to make a living and help our country during the war, the girl's mother sews uniforms for the Filipino and American soldiers who were hiding in the mountains while preparing their attack. There Faustina reminisces about happier days before the war. Her father had taught her how to make paper cranes.

The girl's father, a Japanese residing in the Philippines and owner of a tailoring shop in Silay was captured and imprisoned along with all the other Japanese residents from the rest of the country. Other than being suspected as spies working for the Japanese government who were sent to our country long before the war to map out the land and send intelligence reports these Japanese were also captured in order to serve as hostages in the event that the war finally gets out of hand. Faustina's father albeit a good man was suspected of being a spy by an American officer whose son was a classmate of Faustina in school. The latter gave Faustina a hard time about that although he had no evidence as to its truth. Faustina then experienced being ostracized due to her ancestry but never found out whether or not her father is really a spy.

Though this story is fictional, it is one that many half-Japanese living in our country today share. It is the untold story of the Japanese spies who lived, worked and loved in our country and the families they left behind.

## A THOUSAND PAPER CRANES

It is the year when I can see mostly red. All shades of it is everywhere. A vivid stain on a man's shirt before he collapses to the ground. A puddle of scarlet beside a lifeless body abandoned by the road. On rose petals being strewn atop shroud covered coffins. On Mama's face when people in the town square look at her with narrow eyes.

But most of all a distinct circle at the very centre of white rectangular cloths flapping in the wind and attached to rigid poles reaching to the skies. I have to blink when I look at the sky. Sometimes even the stars look red as well.

"FAUSTINA! Please stop staring at the sky and help me finish this jacket!" Mama's voice interrupts my thoughts as I stare at the distant blinking lights. There are several of them lately appearing in a straight line then vanishing just as quickly sometimes accompanied by an eerie siren piercing the night.

I hold the khaki gabardine cloth for her while she cuts them with her shears. Ever since we arrived in Barangay Poblacion, Mama, along with other tailors, has been sewing thicker uniforms for the soldiers of the 74<sup>th</sup> Regiment who were retreating to the mountains. There is no table in the hut large enough for her to freely spread her fabrics on unlike the one we had in the shop. But we had to leave all that behind.

"*Mama*, will we ever go back to the big house?", I ask trying my best to sound casual. It takes her awhile to respond. "When the war ends, Tina. When the Japanese are gone.", she says in a voice that sounds more than a little sad.

I push my luck, “Will we ever see *Papa* again?”. Mama pretends not to hear and snips away until the cloth falls apart. She no longer needs my assistance so I head for the cot we share.

Lying down I recall the last time I saw Papa. It was almost four years ago. On the morning of December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Mama and I were preparing to go to St. Didacus Parish Church to hear Mass. The three of us were having breakfast together when we heard urgent rapping on the door accompanied by impatient shouts of Papa’s name.

It was Papa who answered the door to a police officer and a man I could not see. They talked to him in angry voices as Mama and I looked on. Papa said some words then quietly returned from the door. He went straight to the master’s bedroom as if to retrieve something. He emerged with a large canvas bag.

“*Papa*, where are you going?!” I ran to him in a state of panic. He knelt down, stroked my cheek and told me never to forget the secret of the cranes. I could hear Mama’s stifled sob and he stroked her cheek as well. Then without a word or a backward glance he left with the two people waiting for him. Mama held me in her arms as I shook and cried.

Wiping a familiar tear, I feel around on the stool beside the cot for one of the paper cranes Papa made for me. It is the red one I notice as I stare at it in the dying kerosene light. I feel Mama lying down beside me just as the faint sound of bombs and shrieks can be heard from afar.

I fall asleep dreaming of Papa, Mama and me having an afternoon picnic in a field of sugarcane and cherry blossoms.

I turn twelve years old the next day. But there is no celebration like before. Nor do I expect any. It is wartime after all. Still, Mama makes me smile with a “happy birthday” kiss and a gift wrapped in painted paper. I open my present carefully and stare at the dress she made for me. It is stylish and one of a kind, as my mom’s dresses were known for back at the shop.

“Do you like it?” She asks with a hint of worry.

“Of course Mama. It’s..different.” I cheerfully assure her. “Just like you”, I think but do not say aloud.

Later that day, I use Mama’s present wrapper to make cranes and think of Papa. “*Fold a thousand of these cranes and the wish you make will come true.*”, he told me once. He used to fold so many of these cranes himself. I always wondered what it is he would like to wish for.

My classmates at Silay Elementary School never thought much of me except when I fold the cranes. Papa taught me well but I am not as fast as him. He can make so many things out of paper; birds, cranes, boats, sometimes even a flower for Mama.

One time as I was teaching a classmate how to fold a paper crane, Enrique Fort, the son of an American officer, stood behind me. “My dad said that your father is a Japanese spy. Is that true?”, he inquired in a loud and mean voice that made everyone else look at me.

I did not know what he was talking about. “My father is a businessman. He owns a tailoring shop.”, I replied bewildered. But it was too late. I saw my classmates look at me with hatred in their eyes. They started to whisper and glare at me. Some of them crumpled paper into rocks and pelted me with them.

It hurt but I did not cry. For the first time I understood why people looked at Mama and me with narrow eyes.

When I got home I wanted to ask Mama if Papa was a Japanese spy but changed my mind. I decided I did not really want to know.

The air raids are more frequent now. Explosions and gunshots are heard everywhere. On the radio that morning it was announced that American Forces are flying in. It wouldn't be long before our country will be liberated.

Mama and I are on our way home from the market when I notice the friendly Japanese sentries no longer at their post by the road. I also did not notice the Japanese flag waving at the public school.

We just got off the carabao cart and Mama is paying the driver when we hear shouting from our neighbour's house.

"JAPAN SURRENDERED! JAPAN SURRENDERED!", Tiyay Amparo screams at the top of her lungs while running out of her hut followed by her three youngest children. The mute sugarcane worker, Tiyoy Evaristo carrying a radio transmitter confirms it with a smile on his face.

Almost everyone in Barangay Poblacion are out of their houses and whooping for joy. I can also feel my mother's relief and apprehension. I look up and suddenly the sky looks blue again.

The next day, we board a train in Fabrica to go back to Silay. Carrying all our belongings we hope to resume the life we once had before the war.

The house is a mess when we enter it. There are signs that it was used as a Japanese headquarter. A broken radio transmitter, Japanese cigarette boxes, bottles of what looks like Coca-cola but the words written in Japanese, a notebook, a map and paper cranes.

After examining a paper crane to see if it is Papa's, I notice a white envelope lying beside it. Mama's name, *Josephina*, is written at the back and I promptly hand it to her.

I watch her tear open the envelope with trembling hands. Inside is a piece of paper that she reads until her body shakes and she falls on her knees wide-eyed. "No, no, noo.." She says softly then shakes her head until tears came and her body racked with sobs.

"He is not coming back Faustina..He is never coming back.", is all Mama could say.

I can feel the hot tears burning my cheeks as my world spins slowly out of control. Still carrying my bag, I run out of the room and down the street, past Silay Elementary School, the municipal hall, the old courthouse and the public plaza until I reach St. Didacus Parish Church. I do not stop running until I am up at the belfry. All the while I can hear Mama screaming "WHERE ON EARTH ARE YOU GOING FAUSTINA?! YOU COME BACK HERE THIS INSTANT!".

I do not answer her. I have a thousand paper cranes to hurl at the sky.