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A THOUSAND CRANES

by

Kathryn Schultz Miller



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(A THOUSAND CRANES)

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A THOUSAND CRANES

A Play in One Act
For One Male and Two Females with doubling

CHARACTERS

SADAKO a twelve-year-old Japanese girl
living in Hiroshima
KENJI Sadako's fourteen-year-old friend
(also plays ACTOR 1 and FATHER)
GRANDMOTHER OBA CHAN the spirit of
Sadako's deceased Grandmother
(also plays ACTOR 2 and MOTHER)

TIME: 1955

PLACE: Hiroshima, Japan

**Special thanks to my husband, Barry Miller,
and my good friends and associates
Dain Paige and Dahn Schwarz
for their contributions to this work.**

A THOUSAND CRANES

AT RISE: *The playing area is a circle of about 20 feet by 20 feet. Audience is seated on three sides of the playing area. Upstage R of the circle will be a musical or instrument "station" with percussion instruments and recorded music arranged in such a way that at appropriate times actors may sit comfortably on a stool and contribute music and sound effects to the performance. UL are standing fans of various pastels and varying heights, the tallest being less than 5 feet. To the left and right downstage are two white masks on each side in tube holders about waist high. GRANDMOTHER OBA CHAN will wear a magnificent Japanese mask. ACTORS 1 and 2 will carry white masks when playing the parts of the DOCTORS. SPIRITS will be indicated by red masks on holders but will not actually be worn by actors. SADA KO, KENJI, MOTHER and FATHER, will not wear masks. ACTORS 1 and 2 will wear all black. SADA KO wears a simple western-style school uniform of a skirt and blouse with a tie.*

The play begins in silence. ACTORS 1 and 2 bow to each other before the music stand. SADA KO watches from behind the music stand. ACTORS 1 and 2 mime lifting a large piece of paper off the floor. In mirrored motions, they carry the paper to DC, carefully place it on the floor and gently smooth it out. They bow again, then

turn U. SADAKO crosses down to paper as recorded folding music begins. The mood of the music gentle and pleasant. ACTORS 1 and 2 count with SADAKO as she mimes the folding of a larger-than-life crane.

ALL (*punctuating their words with percussion sounds*).

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine...
(*SADAKO mimes the lifting of the giant bird with both hands. It is very light. She thrusts the bird into flight.*)

SADAKO. Ten. (*SADAKO blows as if to launch it. ALL watch it in the sky, from left to right. To AUDIENCE.*)
My name is Sadako. I was born in Japan in 1943. My home was called Hiroshima. (*Quiet sound effects come from ACTORS 1 and 2.*) When I was two years old, my mother held me in her arms. She sang a song to me. (*ACTOR 2 sings a soothing, quiet melody.*) It was a quiet summer morning. Inside our small house my Grandmother was preparing tea. (*SADAKO pauses while ACTOR 2 sings.*) Suddenly there was a tremendous flash of light that cut across the sky! (*A very, very loud startling BOOM noise. SADAKO falls into a kneeling position, covering her head. When all is quiet she stands.*) My name is Sadako. This is my story. (*A dramatic rhythm beat, not as loud as before and slowly fading.*)

ACTOR 2 (*quietly fading away*). Sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine, seventy...

(*SADAKO and ACTOR 1, now KENJI, have moved U and now KENJI comes bounding on to playing area, out of breath and laughing. He wears a black cap to distinguish himself as KENJI. He begins to count, determining by how many seconds he has won the race with*

SADAKO. As ACTOR 2's counting fades he picks it up. They say the primary numbers, one and two and three, etc., together.)

ACTOR 2 (*fading*). Seventy...seventy-one...seventy-two...

KENJI. One...two...three...four

(SADAKO runs in out of breath and laughing.)

KENJI. Beat you by four seconds!

SADAKO. Four? You're lying!

KENJI (*laughing*). It was actually four and a half, but I let you have that.

SADAKO. Oh! You...! (*Slumping.*) You always win! You should let somebody else win sometime.

KENJI. Why, Sadako. You can't mean that I should cheat so that you can win.

SADAKO. Oh, it wouldn't be cheating so much as...polite.

KENJI (*laughing*). And I suppose when you run in the girl's contest next month you'll want the judges to be *polite* and let somebody else win.

SADAKO. Well, no.

KENJI. I thought so.

SADAKO. Oh, Kenji, do you think I have a chance to win?

KENJI (*mocking*). You? You win a race against the fastest girls in Hiroshima? You can't win.

SADAKO. Why not?

KENJI. Because you're a turtle that's why. A great big lumbering turtle. (*Mimes slow turtle, laughing at his jest.*)

SADAKO. I am not a turtle!

KENJI. Yes, you are.

SADAKO. Am not.

KENJI. Are too.

SADAKO. Well, if I'm a turtle, then you're a frog!

KENJI. A frog?

SADAKO. Yes. A great big green one with warts all over it.

KENJI. Sadako, you can't possibly mean...croak...*(Putting her on.)* Well, where on earth could that have come from? Croak!

SADAKO. Oh, you.

KENJI. Look, Sadako, my hand is turning green...croak ...and it has warts all over it! *(He crouches to a frog position and sticks out his tongue, leaping around, croaking. Uses bill of his cap to indicate the mouth of the croaking frog.)* Croak! Croak!

SADAKO *(laughing in spite of herself)*. Now, you stop that. *(She is laughing almost uncontrollably, soon KENJI stops and laughs with her. They stop, leaning on each other, gaining composure.)* Kenji, tell me the truth. Do you think I have any chance of winning the races next month?

KENJI. Sadako, I will tell you the truth. I believe you will win.

SADAKO *(thrilled)*. You really think so? You really, really do?

KENJI. Yes. I really, really do.

SADAKO. Oh, Kenji! *(She hugs him.)* Wait until I tell my father. He will be so proud of me! *(She starts to go.)*

KENJI. Now don't quit practicing!

SADAKO. Oh, I won't.

KENJI. See you tomorrow?

SADAKO. Tomorrow! *(She moves U as if to exit.)*

(KENJI, now ACTOR 1, moves to instrument station and makes music for scene change. SADAKO moves U as ACTOR 2, now MOTHER, moves into the scene. She is counting out candles and putting them on the table. She wears a kimono. ACTOR 1 counts and then fades as MOTHER joins in and finally ends the counting.)

ACTOR 1. One hundred and eighteen, one hundred and nineteen, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and twenty-one, one hundred and twenty-two...one hundred and twenty-three...*(Again, they speak the primary numbers together.)*

MOTHER *(counting candles)*. One...two...three...four...

(SADAKO comes running in, very excited.)

SADAKO. Mother, Mother! Wait till you hear! I have wonderful news!

MOTHER *(not looking up, continues working)*. Your shoes, Sadako.

SADAKO. Oh. *(She calms down to remove her shoes, puts them by the door, then rushes back to MOTHER.)* Wait till I tell you!

MOTHER. Sadako, show your respect to your elders.

SADAKO. Oh. *(She bows, puts hands together as in prayer and bows her head toward MOTHER.)* Mother, Kenji just told me...!

MOTHER. Sadako, show your respect to our beloved ancestors. *(Disheartened, SADAKO kneels before an imaginary shrine, hands in prayer and bowing her head. Returns to MOTHER, somewhat subdued.)*

SADAKO. Mother, I...

MOTHER. You must wait for your father to tell this earth-shattering news. Now it is time to prepare for dinner.

SADAKO. But, Mother...

MOTHER. Sushi has been prepared, the rice plates have been set. Sadako, you may warm the saki for your father.

SADAKO. Yes, Mother. (*MOTHER straightens candles on the table.*)

(*FATHER enters, takes off his shoes.*)

SADAKO. Father! (*She runs to him, grabs him in embrace and almost twirls him around.*) Wait till I tell you!

FATHER. Well, what is this?

MOTHER (*not angry*). This daughter of yours will not learn discipline.

FATHER. Your mother is right, Sadako. You must learn moderation in all things.

SADAKO. But, Father, I have such wonderful news!

FATHER (*warm*). It seems that everything in your world is wonderful, Sadako. (*Kisses the top of her head.*) You may tell us your news.

SADAKO (*looks anxiously at them BOTH*). Now?

FATHER (*laughing*). Now, Sadako.

SADAKO. Kenji says I'm fast enough to win the race next month! Isn't that wonderful? He thinks I can win!

FATHER (*genuinely impressed*). You have been practicing very hard.

SADAKO. Oh, yes, Father. Kenji and I run every day.

FATHER. Kenji is a fast runner, an excellent athlete.

SADAKO. Yes, he is, Father. And a good teacher, too.

MOTHER. Even so, you must use discipline to practice very hard if you really want to win.

SADAKO. Oh, I want to win, Mother. I want to win more than anything on earth!

FATHER. We are very proud of you, Sadako. (*BOTH parents hug her. MOTHER begins to light candles.*)

SADAKO. Mother, why are you lighting candles on the table?

MOTHER. Soon it will be Oban, Sadako.

FATHER. It is the day of the spirits.

MOTHER. We light a candle for our ancestors who have died.

FATHER. We ask them to return to us and join in our celebration of life.

MOTHER (*has lit all but last candle*). This one is for Obachan, your Grandmother.

SADAKO. I remember her. I was only a baby, but I remember how warm my grandmother's hands were. (*She kneels before the candles. MOTHER and FATHER move away. Their lines now sound like statements in a dream.*)

FATHER. Obachan died in the Thunderbolt.

SADAKO. She had a gentle voice.

MOTHER. Suddenly there was a great flash of light.

SADAKO. Her smile was like sunshine.

FATHER. It cut through the sky!

SADAKO. Grandmother? Grandmother?

MOTHER. The world was filled with blinding light. (*MOTHER and FATHER spin away with arms up in protecting gesture. They twirl to their places behind the music stand where they make percussion sounds.*)

SADAKO. Can you hear me, Grandmother?

FATHER. It took our friends.

SADAKO. Can your spirit really return like they say?

MOTHER. It took our home.

SADAKO. Are you watching me now? Do you see me when I run?

FATHER. It took your Grandmother, Oba chan.

(MOTHER and FATHER now become ACTOR 1 and ACTOR 2. They use a percussion sound that builds and when it stops the silence is startling. They begin to count.)

ACTORS 1 and 2. One hundred and fifty-one...

SADAKO. One. *(Blows out first candle.)*

ACTORS 1 and 2. One hundred and fifty-two...

SADAKO. Two. *(Blows out second candle.)*

ACTORS 1 and 2. One hundred and fifty-three...

SADAKO. Three. *(Blows out third candle.)*

ACTORS 1 and 2. One hundred and fifty-four...

SADAKO *(before the candle of her GRANDMOTHER, looks up)*. Will I win my race, Grandmother? Can you hear me now? *(Turns back to candle.)* Four. *(Blows out candle, stands and looks around.)* Grandmother?

(ACTOR 1 plays a loud dramatic percussion sound that fades. ACTOR 2, using the voice she will use later as GRANDMOTHER speaks.)

ACTOR 2/GRANDMOTHER *(as she moves slowly, twirling away until she is hidden behind the largest fan)*. I hear you, Sadako!

(The loud cymbal sound comes again and fades into a new sound. Now a fast, quick staccato sound is heard from the instrument stand. ACTOR 1 also is KENJI,

using only the voice from his location. ACTOR 2 turns U to put on GRANDMOTHER OBA CHAN's mask. SADAKO begins to run in place.)

KENJI (*moving D to replace set piece and back to music stand.*) You little turtle, you'll never win at that speed.

(SADAKO speaks as if he is beside her, running.)

SADAKO (*running*). I am not a turtle!

KENJI. Sure you are, that's how fast turtles run, isn't it?

SADAKO. Croak, croak, croak! (*They BOTH laugh.*)

KENJI. I bet I can make it to the river before you!

SADAKO. Bet you can't.

KENJI. Bet I can!

SADAKO. Bet you can't. (*She runs faster in place as percussion sound also speeds up.*)

(ACTOR 2, who now becomes GRANDMOTHER OBA CHAN, turns and raises her arms. Her costume and mask are magnificent. A majestic sound is used by ACTOR 1 to accompany her movement. SADAKO is becoming out of breath. GRANDMOTHER makes a magical gesture toward SADAKO. SADAKO trips and falls.)

KENJI (*still out of scene*). Sadako, are you all right?

SADAKO (*rubbing her hip*). Oooh...

KENJI. Here, let me help you up. (*She takes his imaginary hand and stands.*) Are you all right?

SADAKO. Yes, I'm fine.

KENJI. All right then, let's begin again. (*Again, SADAKO runs very fast to the music. Again, GRANDMOTHER makes her magical gesture. SADAKO falls.*) Sadako?

SADAKO. I'm okay. Just a little dizzy, that's all. (*Staccato music begins again very fast, but SADAKO is slowing down.*)

KENJI. Discipline, Sadako! (*She speeds up, we can see that she is in pain but she picks up the pace of the run.*)

SADAKO. I'm trying, Grandmother. I want to win, Grandmother. I want to fly like the wind!

GRANDMOTHER/ACTOR 2. I hear you, Sadako! (*SADAKO moves slowly in a circle, obviously dizzy.*)

(KENJI and GRANDMOTHER become ACTORS 1 and 2. During the following lines, masks on poles will be carried and moved in the air by ACTORS 1 and 2. The masks will be stark white and ghostly. ACTORS 1 and 2 may use many voices and the lines should run into each other to give the impression of many. SADAKO tries to escape the floating faces but they dance around her, bearing down to force her to bed. Recorded music uses a gong sound and heavy beat.)

ACTOR 1. What is the matter with Sadako?

ACTOR 2. What is the matter with Sadako?

ACTOR 1. Why did she fall?

ACTOR 2. Why did she fall?

ACTOR 1. What could be wrong?

ACTOR 2. What could be wrong?

SADAKO. Nothing! I'm just tired, that's all!

ACTOR 1. X-ray her chest.

ACTOR 2. Examine her blood.

ACTOR 1. Put her in a hospital.

ACTORS 1 and 2. Hospital, hospital, hospital...

SADAKO. A hospital? No!

ACTOR 1. Put her to bed.

ACTOR 2. Put her to bed.

SADAKO. But there's nothing wrong with me!

ACTOR 1. Why did she fall?

ACTOR 2. Why did she fall?

ACTOR 1. Take some more tests.

ACTOR 2. Take some more tests.

ACTOR 1. You'll be just fine.

ACTOR 2. Now don't you worry.

ACTOR 1. Don't you worry.

ACTOR 2. Put her to bed.

SADAKO. But I'll miss the race!

ACTOR 1. Now don't you worry.

ACTOR 2. You'll be just fine.

ACTOR 1. Put her to bed.

SADAKO. I want to fly like the wind!

ACTORS 1 and 2 (*holding white masks above their stands*). Leukemia, leukemia, leukemia, leukemia, leukemia, leukemia...

SADAKO. Leukemia?

(ACTORS 1 and 2 drop masks into holders with a jarring thud. They become MOTHER and FATHER speaking with faces forward as if speaking to a doctor.)

MOTHER. Leukemia? My little girl? But that's impossible! The atom bomb didn't even do so much as scratch her!

FATHER. The atom-bomb sickness? My daughter?

SADAKO. But it can't be true, Mother, can it? (*MOTHER and FATHER rush to her seated on the bench.*) I don't have any scars from the bomb. It didn't touch me. It can't be true, can it, Mother?