

Cherri Randall

## As I Fold My Ego Origami-Style

This past spring my teenaged daughters were interested in proms and weddings and buying magazines featuring brides wearing dresses with beaded bodices and veils of illusion lace. I pretended to be disinterested in their latest craze, adding nothing to their conversations and reading the magazines late at night as they slumbered. I have been down the aisle once, albeit the institutional-tiled hallway of the county courthouse with the judge's secretary for a witness at the chronological age of twenty-one. My friend Tiina has yet to marry, though she has been in long-term relationships and has an adorable son with long limbs, blond hair, and brilliant eyes, just like her. It's our private joke that we both prayed throughout pregnancy for sperm possessed entirely of twenty-three recessive chromosomes. In this, both of us were blessed.

I prayed twice and am now the mother of two daughters. Neither has my red hair, and one of my earliest parenting disasters resulted when I told people who complimented me on their cherubic smiles in line to buy Barbie dolls at K-Mart that I had a blonde and a brunette, and had I tried one more time I might have gotten a redhead, too. This was me echoing my childhood. Everything else I did was wrong, but my parents both adored my hair color. I made this remark one too many times when Kimberly, my brunette, confided later to me at home, her chubby little hand on my cheek fixing my eyes upon her earnest face, that she wished she had red hair for me. I felt the knife lodge in my heart.

Thus I, of all people, should not be surprised that hair color matters so little when it comes to loving another person. Since I am single and wanting to find someone to love, I have given a lot of thought to what does matter in relationships. Still, I am always delighted when a man targets me specifically for the reason that I have red hair. It always reminds me of my husband's reaction the first time we were together, how his eyebrows shot up and his eyes bulged and he said "My God! You're a redhead down here, too."

"What color did you think it would be?" I asked him.

"Brown. Just like all the blondes have."

Years afterward, when I related this experience to Tiina, she wanted to know why I didn't ask him how many blondes that had been exactly. It never occurred to me to ask, and I cannot wish for a

time machine to go back and keep us apart, because every time I think of being in marital hell, I also think of those two girls, one blonde, one brunette, and I have to unwish it. Tiina understands this. Not everyone does.

One of my officemates came in the week before Halloween sporting a neon orange shirt. I complimented the color and was rewarded with a fifteen-minute anecdote that involved all the various purchases her devoted husband had made in the past few months. I did not mind the fifteen minutes. I was grading papers, and an interruption was a welcome thing. I did not mind the purchases made on her behalf, not the flowers (cut flowers die; I consider myself a pacifist, not a flower murderer), not the candy (I am trying to lose weight so if I ever do have sex again, nothing jiggles), and not even the orange shirt (which her husband liked so much he purchased several other garments in matching shades. I do not look good in orange.\*).

What I minded was that she had a list and I didn't. Or that I have very different lists. I'm raising two girls alone, and I'm not on anyone else's list, but I have lists for them which include two yearbooks at \$48.00 each, MAC lipsticks, taking two girls plus friends out for milkshakes, driving my car every few weeks to either the orthodontist or the dermatologist and then paying the deductibles and co-pays, tickets to concerts, iPods, piano lessons, Converse sneakers, black nail polish and this latest thing, danshi and gasenshi, beautifully ornate paper the brunette daughter needs for art class, where her interest in origami has recently flourished. No orange shirts or handful of flowers on my list.

The well from which I give is constrained by the size of the stipend teaching assistants are paid and the laws of child support but swells every semester with the disbursement of student loans and with the springtime refund of federal taxes. I am between waves and have questioned the necessity of imported paper for art class on no other grounds than I have to question something. Math is a four letter word in my vocabulary, not because I can't do it, but because I have to.

Origami, I am told by my brunette daughter, comes from the Japanese verb *oru*, to fold, and the noun *kami*, or paper. The directions for folding are diagrams; the finished product is a model. The method of folding is a design, and she wants to be a paper folder, the name for

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\*See earlier account re. red hair. Redheads seldom look good in Halloween colors but make up for it on St. Patrick's Day.

an origami artist. She has wanted to be a rock star on MTV, a photographer for *Rolling Stone Magazine*, a cosmetologist who does monster makeup for movies, and a veterinarian specializing in rodents, to name some few recent potential futures she has envisioned for herself. These possibilities have effected the purchase of two guitars and piano lessons, a digital camera and printer, cosmetics and professional brushes, and an endless parade of hamsters. I understand on the one hand how next to this a few sheets of paper, colored on one side, white on the other, cut into six-inch squares, seem insignificant. I also wonder how she does not understand my reticence to indulge financially in another of her whims.

Thus her campaign begins. Danshi is a *kozo* paper, thick, elegant, and white, which ladies of the court preferred for writing poems during the Heian period (AD 794-1192). She tells me this because I write poems, or at least I intend to when she grows up and I have room in my life for pursuing art. She tells me about other varieties of paper, and I'm enchanted by the ingredients: bamboo, straw, wood pulp, sandalwood, even silk. Then she lists the qualities: blurred ink, persimmon tannin for waterproofing—then textures: furrowed and creped. But what interests me the most is the process, the different folds involved.

The simplest fold is the valley fold, where a flat piece of paper is folded toward the paper folder. If you unfold it, the crease line forms a valley, and thus the name. The second most common fold is the mountain fold, where the paper is folded away from the paper folder. This folded crease forms an upraised ridge in the shape of a mountain. The only difference in these two folds is direction, so mountain folds are commonly made by turning the paper over and making a valley fold, then turning the paper back to its original position. Certain combinations of basic folds form bases. The four most common, from simple to more complex, are the kite base, the fish base, the bird base, and the frog base. The models that my daughter makes are marvels to me, but she says they are relatively simple, and she remains unimpressed with her own talent. If she is to realize her dreams, I will have to provide more beautiful paper.

I am considering this when she clinches the deal by mentioning that the Japanese transmitted the designs through oral tradition, never writing down the various diagrams until 1797, but passing the information down from mother to daughter. I am interested in Asian culture—everything from décor to art to food to religion. For several

years now, I have called her my little *yobo*, the Korean word for sweetheart. She is happy to finally be taking German classes, and calls me her *mutter*, which in English looks like what I do when she comes up with another interest that is going to cost money, but she pronounces it *mooter*, which in my mouth rhymes with scooter and is still not the correct pronunciation. I respond with what I have learned in my Arab literature class and say, call me Um Kimberly, for one way to name a mother in that culture is by saying who she has given birth to.

The following day Kimberly is watching the movie *Stepmom*. Last August, when the third guy I dated in the past year said he wanted to stop seeing me because he was not ready to be a stepfather, my daughters offered to go live with their father so I could be free to pursue the course of true love.

I admit there are times I threaten to pack them up and cart them to his house straight away. I admit I have fantasies of the peace and quiet following the wake of such a decision and the poetry I might write in that space. But these moments occur typically when they are telling each other at 8:05 a.m. how much they hate each other *give me the flat iron you have my jeans on give them back bitch I hate you I can't wait for you to go to college I can't wait to go to college and leave your dumb ass behind MOM!* These moments do not come when some guy is looking into my eyes and saying that he is not ready to be a stepfather, no matter how smart-sweet-funny-pretty-redheaded-whatever he may find me to be. My girls are nearly grown and full of hormones, head-strong, play their music too loud, and have cell phones permanently attached as a prosthetic device to one ear. That is who they are right now. They are going to be women someday, cool women, each with her consciousness raised through the roof. But I remember who they were when they were my babies. They were inside my belly, ripe as a watermelon which had to be sliced open to get them safely out. I tell them all I have done from the moment the surgeon's laser split the first two skin cells to start that eight-inch incision is pursue the course of true love.

Their visible relief upon hearing me say this is a beautiful thing I store away in my memory bank, shoring me up for the next morning we are running late for school again and I wish they would shut up or move out.



Saturday we are looking for a parking place at the mall. Me, the girls, and their friend Candace. A woman my age is walking toward the entrance on the arm of what Candace declares to be an "old geezer." She wants to know what a woman like that is doing with him. Before I can say something about the possibilities of love, enlightening my young charges with my discourse on looking beyond the shallow surfaces of the world, my other daughter Carly tells Candace that he must have money, and they look at the woman and say, "Go Anna Nicole."

"Girls!" I protest. "I want you to live in a world where women don't have to sell themselves."

"For one thing," Kimberly says, "Anna Nicole never sold herself."

"Oh yeah," I interrupt. "What would you call it?"

"She was renting it out," Candace says, laughing hysterically.

"Not even that," Kimberly says. "She only let him play with her boobies. She wasn't doing the deed with him."

"I wish my boobs were worth that kind of money," Carly says.

"Me too," Kimberly says.

I am appalled. I want to yell at them that they have to be capable of caring for themselves, what a gift it will be to give a man someday when he knows my daughter is with him not because he pays the bills and she can't, but because she chooses this option despite the ability to support herself. I am frustrated. I want to explain to them what a necessity it is in case the man does not pan out, whether he runs off with a bimbo or gets run over by a truck. Finally, though, I am jealous. I stand there looking after this woman disappearing into Dillard's with my mouth open. I wonder if my officemate is also in the mall today trying on orange dresses, eating Cinnabons, and perusing the shelves at Waldenbooks. I have been looking a lot lately at couples jockeying carts together in Wal-Mart, wondering why I am not part of a couple. Why it seems to me that I cannot *give* my boobs away.

Except I don't really want my daughters to ever think of their boobs this way. It is easier for me to articulate my vision of their futures by saying what I don't want it to be. Nobody wants her child to grow up and be the worker who measures and cuts material in the fabric department of Cloth World. No one ever wants his son to grow up and be an exterminator, despite the fact that we want these people to exist when we need to squash a lot of bugs or are sewing Halloween costumes. No one wants her baby to grow up thinking her boobs are a commodity. Everybody wants a future for her child that includes

being the brightest star. It's what I want for my daughters, though I don't know what space in the sky they want to fill up yet. This is why I have paid for piano lessons and pretty paper and Purina hamster chow. I am trying to give Kimberly the opportunity to find her space.

She thinks she should know it automatically. Her sister has wanted to be a chef since she was seven years old. Kimberly's Barbie dolls would be rock stars one day and school teachers the next. Carly's dolls were always hosting a cooking show on the Food Channel behind their little pink plastic kitchenettes. When she was a toddler, I would pick her up and put her on the counter when I was cooking, and she's been cracking eggs and stirring batter since before she could talk. I didn't want her to go watch TV and leave me alone. I meant to spend all my time with her, sacrificed everything to be a stay-at-home mom. There was nowhere else I wanted to be except with her. She has other interests, but cooking is the one that is central to who she wants to be. Kimberly despairs that she doesn't know what she wants for her future. Her ideas change. She isn't like Carly and me.

"Like me?" I ask incredulously.

"Yes, like you. Of course, like you. You've always been a writer. I remember when I was still sitting in the baby seats of shopping carts, and people would come up and tell you how much they liked your last newspaper column."

I almost ask her if she remembers me wishing I had a daughter with red hair, but instead I breathe a little prayer that that particular episode was forgotten.

"You clown," I say instead, ruffling her hair, which drives her insane. She spends all that time with the flat iron every morning. "I didn't always want to be a writer."

"Come on," she protests, trying to reconcile the hours of her life I have spent word processing or scribbling in parks with this new idea. "What else did you want to be then?"

She asks me this while we are cooking together, because she wants to learn to cook as well as Carly and I do. She says we will all have husbands someday, and she doesn't want hers to feel like he got the one girl at our house who couldn't cook. I tell her to fold the beaten egg whites into the batter we are preparing.

"Fold them?"

"Yes. It means to blend a light ingredient with a heavier mixture using gentle turns."

"Oh," she answers, watching. "Does the direction matter?"

"What direction?"

"The folding. Is it away or towards the cook?"

"I don't think it matters."

"It matters in origami, but you can turn the paper however you want. A mountain fold is just a turned-over valley fold." She looks at me earnestly, needing only to put her hand on my cheek to be three years old again. "I don't really want to buy any more paper."

"I know."

"You do?" she asks.

"I can read you like a book, Girl," I tease her, and I can see a particular tension ebbing out of her shoulders.

"What should I do with all the leftover paper?" she wants to know.

"I thought I'd write poems on it someday," I answer. She smiles, pouring the batter into pans.

What I ended up telling Kimberly is that when I was her age, science was what turned me on. In eighth grade, we got new textbooks that talked about DNA for the first time. She looks at me and says she didn't know I was so old. I start to tell her my mother didn't get electricity till she was ten, but I let the moment pass. My mother could not envision any future for me that didn't include getting married and making babies. This is the transmission of her culture, and I am making a monumental effort to break this chain. I think about how much I hate snakes and wonder if this transmission goes all the way back to Eve, wonder where to draw the lines between DNA and USA. As if that is where the line belongs anyway.

We used to eat the buffet at a Chinese restaurant called Lin's every Sunday. One day I bit into the crab rangoon, and the filling squirted out, blistering the roof of my mouth with the sensation of cream cheese on fire. I gulped water and said "hot bite!" A little girl's voice echoed me, saying "hot bite." It was so irresistibly cute I looked around for the source of my echo.

She was Chinese, two years old, adorable. Her parents were Caucasian and adopted her from an orphanage. Her name was Natalie, and she was born in Fujian, China. I liked talking to Natalie and her mother about how she was learning the English language, how they were concerned about giving her a sense of her native heritage, but she was so bright she absorbed everything around her quickly and was becoming a typical little American girl. Before the restaurant closed, we used to see her at least once a month with her

pink beribboned silky black hair. Is it her cultural heritage to grow up in an orphanage? Is that better than eating rice here every week? How much of Natalie is Chinese and how much of her is American?

If people are origami figures, her paper is Chinese, but she is being folded here, in America. I hope she will be a beautiful model when she is complete. I want all little girls to be that perfect woman they are destined to someday be. I wanted it for me, but I am not sure the design will ever be finished. I think I started out with pretty paper, but I have been folded by so many hands that I do not know what shape I should be. I exist. I love the girls and my job, but there is a part of me that is a gaping maw. I want to write love poems, but the only one I have managed till now says I have known the congress of sparrows while longing for the jaw of the wolf.

I don't know what guys have been so worried about, because at this age, my daughters are hardly in need of a father figure. What they need is someone to hand them the car keys and get out of the way. I can do that myself. Kimberly told me during her origami stage that *kami*, the word for paper, is also a homonym for spirit. I think motherhood is almost a homonym for kamikaze then. I like the idea that people are origami models, and we all start with our paper, our spirit, our DNA, and then life folds us, culture folds us, our parents fold us. Once, when I told Carly I could read her like a book, she said, "Of course you can. You wrote the book. But when I'm out of here, I get the pen." It isn't really that simple. She'll be stuck with all sorts of pages I would like to erase, many of them worse than wishing for a third daughter with red hair. I think about picking her up while I was pregnant with her sister, how my back ached lifting her to the counter, how she learned to cook but also acquired a language, how of all the little girls in the world she had a vocabulary at that age which included boil, broil, bake, and braise. Did I fold her rightly, that beautiful glossy spirit I gave birth to nearly seventeen years ago?

Sometimes it felt like I was folding a stratum of rock, the geological definition meaning to bend stone. Sometimes I wanted to fold, as in I wanted to throw in my cards and leave the game. Often, I felt like the business of running my life should fold. I have been a hawk folding my wings closed over them when they needed protection. I have folded them to my breast when they needed me and when I needed them. I have folded laundry and ironing boards and maps just to reach this point where they could think about folding themselves. I have folded chairs and tables and egg whites into batter.

I have folded my own needs down so compactly to make room for those two girls that I can't find myself anymore. I have folded my ego double so that one part lies over the other so many times that I can't find the truth of who I am or what I need anymore. I don't know if I need a man or a husband or a lover, or if I just want one, or if this is what my mother taught me to think I need and want because it was the only future she could write on my pages.

What I do know, finally, is that I do not need a list with orange shirts or flowers. I need someone to witness my life. What I also know is that I have two beautiful daughters who drive me crazy and will do things with their lives I didn't see coming and probably won't like. I have folded their pages as well as I could with the skills that I had. Someday I hope they understand that, that while I would have liked it if Carly could have every ingredient and kitchen gadget her heart desired, I also like it that she can improvise and put a little elbow grease into her culinary art. I hope Kimberly understands that I can't mind the paper or the piano lessons or coaxing hamsters out from under the bed at 2:00 a.m., because this was part of the process of finding out who she wants to be.

I am still in the process myself. I am not sure if it ever ends, or if it should end. I do not know what my daughters will write in future pages anymore, so then I know for sure what I am going to write on mine. I am seeing a wonderful man now, though I do not know how many more pages of my life he will be on. I would like for him to be on a lot of them because I like being his friend. I tell my daughters this, and they want to know why. I tell them my theory about people as origami. I say that sometimes people get folded the wrong way, that sometimes girls have to sell their boobs or guys only care about counting more boobs. People can hurt you unintentionally by not understanding you, or sometimes people even hurt each other deliberately.

When I am through and they say what does this have to do with what kind of man a woman needs, I answer simply, "One who does not try to fold you."