ONCE UPON A TIME there lived a sailmaker. Yasuko, for that was his name, lived high above the sea, and all his life he had looked out upon a marsh below where hundreds of cranes gathered each summer and fall. He loved the sight of these stately white creatures. They reminded him of sails, and when he worked at his loom, weaving his fabric, he imagined he was weaving crane feathers -- sleek and strong and beautiful.

One evening, during the season of storms, Yasuko heard something crash against his door. When he opened it, he was startled to see a crane lying upon his doorstep, stunned and near death. He carried the poor creature inside, lay it by the fire, and carefully spread its crumpled wings out to dry. He tended to his wounded crane for many days, and when at last the bird's strength returned, he took it outside and set it free. It quickly flew away.

Yasuko was surprised by how lonely he felt when the crane was gone. It was then he realized that he wished for a wife, and now, when he looked out at the cranes gathered together, he envied them for their companionship. He began to dream of a day when he too would have a companion.

Time passed, and then one night a beautiful young woman appeared at his door. She stood shivering in the evening wind, for her clothes were made of the thinnest material -- material like the fabric Yasuko worked at his loom. "Could you let me inside," the woman begged. "It's growing cold out here."

Yasuko warmly welcomed her inside and offered her a bowl of soup and the warmth of his fire. They sat together all evening, talking.

Her name, she said, was Naoko. Yasuko was entranced by her sweet voice, and her gentleness and beauty soon won his heart. "Please stay here with me," he asked.

She looked up at him with glistening eyes and said, "I will."

"Would you be my wife?" he asked shyly. "I will care for you, though I am only a poor sailmaker."

"Yes," she said softly, "and Yasuko, I can help you."

"No, no, you need not help me," he said, but Naoko was insistent. "A wife must help her husband as she can," she said, and though he claimed that all was well, after a while she saw how very poor he was.

"Let me weave a magic sail for you," she said one night.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Ask me no questions, dear husband. Leave me with your loom tonight, but promise me one thing. You will never look at me while I am at work. Will you promise?"

"I will," Yasuko said, and he swore never to break this promise.
That night he went to sleep to the sound of the shuttles' click and the slide of the loom. When he woke, Naoko stood beside him holding a sail that weighed no more than a single feather yet had the strength of a sail 50 times its weight. And when Yasuko lifted it, he heard the wind in the folds.

"Naoko, you have woven the wind into this sail," he said.

She smiled, and he could see that she was tired, so he put her to sleep while he ran to the harbor to sell the sail. He earned more gold than he had ever earned, and he ran home to celebrate with his beloved.

Time passed, and the cranes returned to the marsh. One night Yasuko spied his wife staring longingly down at them. "They are lovely creatures, aren't they?" he whispered, but Naoko seemed transfixed and did not speak.

One day, not long afterward, a man knocked at their door. When Yasuko saw him, he recognized him as a famous sea captain, and he was amazed to see such an important man at his door. "Yasuko," said the captain, "I have seen the magic sail you made. I need to have one just like that. Make me such a sail, and I will give you enough gold to last you a lifetime. Never again will you be poor."

Yasuko ran at once to Naoko, but when he told her the news, she bowed her head. "My husband, do not ask this of me," she asked in a low voice. "The sail took everything from me last time. I fear what might happen to me if I make another."

"But my wife," Yasuko begged, "we would have a lifetime's gold. We will never want for anything." He pleaded for so long that Naoko at last slipped behind the shoji screen and set to work. "Remember, you must not look," she called to him.

While she worked, he paced restlessly on the deck, looking down at the ship in the harbor.

One whole day passed, and finally Yasuko asked, "Naoko, are you finished yet?" When she did not answer, he continued to pace through the night. At dawn he asked again, and again she did not answer. In this way three days passed.

"Naoko, what are you doing?" Yasuko called on the third day. "Do you need something?" he asked, but when he heard no answer, he could not bear the suspense any longer. Besides, he thought, if he could learn his wife's magic trick, he would not have to ask her to work. He too could weave the magic sails.

He quietly tiptoed up to the screen and peered between the sliding doors. When he saw what was there, he gasped in horror.

A long beak, dark black eyes -- this was the face that turned to him. There stood the crane he had saved in the storm. "Naoko, stop," he cried when he saw that she was weaving her own feathers into the sail.

But the black eyes filled with tears, and without a word, she raised her tattered wings. Lifting herself with difficulty, she flew out the window, disappearing into the clouds.

Yasuko never saw her again. And through the long years after, he wove his sails and watched the cranes below, always waiting and hoping to hear his wife's voice once more.

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