8 LAST DAYS

Near the end of July it was warm and sunny. Sadako seemed to be getting better. "I'm over halfway to one thousand cranes," she told Masahiro, "so something good is going to happen."

And it did. Her appetite came back and much of the pain went away. Dr. Numata was pleased with her progress and told Sadako she could go home for a visit. That night Sadako was so excited she couldn't sleep. To keep the magic working she made more cranes.

Six hundred and twenty-one.

Six hundred and twenty-two ...

It was wonderful to be home with the family for O Bon, the biggest holiday of the year. O Bon was a special celebration for spirits of the dead who returned to visit those they had loved on earth.

Mrs. Sasaki and Mitsue had scrubbed and swept the house until it shone. Fresh flowers brightened the table. Sadako's golden crane and Kokeshi doll were there, too. The air was filled with smells of delicious holiday food. Dishes of bean cakes and rice balls had been placed on the altar shelf for ghostly visitors.

That night Sadako watched her mother put a lantern outside so that spirits could find their way in the dark. She let out a happy sigh. Perhaps, just perhaps, she was home to stay.

For several days a steady stream of friends and relatives came to call on the Sasaki family. By the end of a week Sadako was pale and tired again. She could only sit quietly and watch the others.

"Sadako certainly has good manners now," Mr. Sasaki said. "Oba chan's spirit must be pleased to see how ladylike her granddaughter has become."

"How can you say that!" Mrs. Sasaki cried. "I would rather have our lively Sadako back." She dabbed at her eyes and hurried into the kitchen.

I'm making everyone sad, Sadako thought. She wished she could suddenly turn into her old self. How happy her mother would be then!

As if he knew what was in Sadako's mind, her father said gruffly, "There now, don't worry. After a good night's rest you'll feel fine."

But the next day Sadako had to return to the hospital. For the first time she was glad to be in the quiet hospital room. Her parents sat beside the bed for a long time. Every now and then Sadako drifted off into a strange kind of half-sleep.

"When I die," she said dreamily, "will you put my favorite bean cakes on the altar for my spirit?"

Mrs. Sasaki could not speak. She took her daughter's hand and held it tightly.

"Hush!" Mr. Sasaki said in a funny voice. "That will not happen for many, many years. Don't give up now, Sadako chan. You have to make only a few hundred more cranes."

Nurse Yasunaga gave Sadako medicine that helped her rest. Before her eyes closed, Sadako reached out to touch the golden crane.

"I will get better," she murmured to the Kokeshi doll, "and someday I'll race like the wind."

From then on Dr. Numata gave Sadako blood transfusions or shots almost every day. "I know it hurts," he said, "but we must keep on trying."

Sadako nodded. She never complained about the shots and almost constant pain. A bigger pain was growing deep inside of her. It was the fear of dying. She had to fight it as well as the disease. The golden crane helped. It reminded Sadako that there was always hope.

Mrs. Sasaki spent more and more time at the hospital. Every afternoon Sadako listened for the familiar slap-slap of her plastic slippers in the hall. All visitors had to put on yellow slippers at the door, but Mrs. Sasaki's made a special sound. Sadako's heart ached to see her mother's face so lined with worry.

The leaves on the maple tree were turning rust and gold when the family came one last visit. Eiji handed Sadako a big box wrapped in gold paper and tied with a red ribbon. Slowly Sadako opened it. Inside was something her mother had always wanted for her --- a silk kimono with cherry blossoms on it. Sadako felt hot tears blur her eyes.

"Why did you do it?" she asked, touching the soft cloth. "I'll never be able to wear it and silk costs so much money."

"Sadako chan," her father said gently, "your mother stayed up late last night to finish sewing it. Try it on for her."

With a great effort Sadako lifted herself out of bed. Mrs. Sasaki helped her put on the kimono and tie the sash. Sadako was glad her swollen legs didn't show. Unsteadily she limped across the room and sat in her chair by the window. Everyone agreed that she was like a princess in the kimono.

At that moment Chizuko came in. Dr. Numata had given her permission to visit for a short time. She stared at Sadako in surprise. "You look better in that outfit than in school clothes," she said.

Everyone laughed. Even Sadako. "Then I'll wear it to classes every day when I'm well again," she joked.

Mitsue and Eiji giggled at the idea.

For a little while it was almost like the good times they used to have at home. They played word games and sang Sadako's favorite songs. Meanwhile, she sat stiffly in the chair, trying not to show the pain it caused her. But it was worth the pain. When her parents left, they looked almost cheerful.

Before she went to sleep, Sadako managed to fold only one paper crane.

Six hundred and forty-four ...

It was the last one she ever made.

Comprehension Check 8

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1. Sadako had not folded five hundred cranes by the end of July. ( )

2. When Sadako came home, her mother and Mitsue had cleaned the house. ( )

3. Sadako had to fight the fear of dying as well as the disease. ( )

4. Chizuko came into the room after Sadako's family had gone home. ( )