

# ONE

## MIEKO

“Mieko, come down to breakfast!” Grandma’s cheery voice floated up from the kitchen. “It’s time you got out of bed.”

But Mieko was not in bed. She was sitting very still and feeling very sorry for herself.

“In a minute,” she called back.

Mieko stared at the art supplies lined up on the red lacquer chest. Her art teacher, Mr. Araki, had called them “the four treasures.” There was a fine sable brush, an inkstick, an inkstone shaped like a lily pond, and a roll of rice paper. Mieko had used them to paint Japanese word-pictures. Calligraphy was what she liked to do more than anything else in the world.

Mr. Araki had also told her, “Mieko, you are one of the lucky few who are born with the fifth treasure—beauty in the heart. When you paint, that beauty flows from your heart to your hand, to the brush, and out onto the paper. With lots of practice, you will surely become a great artist.”

Mieko didn’t really understand what beauty in the heart meant, but she knew that she was never so happy as when she had a brush in her hand, with every stroke getting better.

Mieko sighed. She thought about how wonderful it had been to sit alone in her room and paint. She used to weave brushstrokes, curves, and dots into word-pictures that seemed to have a life of their own. Her two black strokes for “man” looked like two legs striding across the fields. She could almost hear the raindrops in her word-picture for “rain.” When she painted, she was in a magical world.

But everything was different now.

She would never forget the day when The Thunderbolt—the atom bomb—was dropped on Nagasaki, sending shock waves out to her town. It was like the end of the world. Windows shattered and roof tiles flew through the air. Mieko was knocked to the ground. When she had put up an arm to shield her face, a jagged piece of glass had torn into her hand, ripping a deep gash from her fingers to the wrist. Blood was everywhere. Now, two weeks later, the wound still throbbed painfully underneath the bandage.

“Nothing serious,” Father had said in his soothing doctor’s voice. “Your hand will heal quickly and you will soon be painting again.”

Mieko did not believe him. The wound looked awful. And her hand was useless. Besides, she had seen many around her with worse injuries, and Father had told them “nothing serious,” too. He said that to make his patients feel better.

And now she had been shipped to Grandpa’s farm.

“Just for a few months, Mieko,” Mother had explained, forcing a smile. “We must remain here to take care of the injured. Besides, the fresh air and farm food will be good for you.”

Mieko wanted to stay home. She was bitter about leaving her parents. She was bitter about leaving her friends. She was frightened about going to a new school. And she hated the horrible bomb that had ruined everything.

“With all the bitterness and hate inside of me,” she thought, “there isn’t room for any beauty.” The fifth treasure was gone.

“Breakfast is waiting, Mieko!” Grandma called again.

Mieko gave a quick brush to her bangs and went downstairs.

She sat at the low table and tried to pick up her chopsticks. When they fell with a clatter, Grandma picked them up and fed Mieko as though she were a

little baby. Her plump face wreathed in smiles, Grandma poked food into Mieko's mouth, then carefully wiped her chin.

"Good food cures everything," Grandma said.

Mieko did not mind the attention, especially when she felt so sorry for herself.

"My!" Grandma gave Mieko's arm a little pinch. "You are as thin as a young bamboo. We saved this special white rice for an important occasion like having you here with us. You must eat every grain."

Mieko remembered that Mother always called it "silver rice." She felt a wave of homesickness. Tears stung her eyes and she could hardly swallow.

Grandma put her arms around Mieko and rocked her back and forth. "Hush, hush!" she crooned. "You are just tired from that long train ride yesterday."

"You will feel better tomorrow," said Grandpa.

Mieko hung her head, knowing that they did not understand. How could tomorrow be better? She would never paint word-pictures again, and she would never feel the joy of having the fifth treasure. She would hear the bomb over and over again, and know that things at home would never be the same.

After supper they all had baths in the backyard tub and put on cotton kimonos. Then they sat outside to enjoy the evening breeze. Twilight fell and crickets began to sing. Mieko thought they sounded sad.

Grandpa pointed to a large rock in the tiny garden behind the house.

"See that?" he said proudly. "Last year I hauled it down the mountain in the cart. Mieko, can you read the words carved into my rock?"

Mieko studied the strokes that formed the word-pictures, but they were difficult to make out. She shook her head.

“ ‘Spilled water never returns to the glass,’ ” Grandpa explained. “It means that one should not worry about things that cannot be changed.”

He paused to puff on his cigarette. Then he went on, “Like Japan losing the war. Like all that has been lost or hurt by the bomb.” And glancing quickly at Mieko, “Like your hand being injured, and your parents sending you to us.”

Grandma smiled, patting Mieko’s shoulder. “I know it’s not easy for a ten-year-old to understand, but you must try.”

Mieko blinked back the tears. She did not want to understand. The only thing she wanted was to be back home, with everything like it was before.

At bedtime Grandma laid out a futon and hung a mosquito net over it for Mieko.

When she saw the four treasures on top of the chest, Grandma nodded approvingly. “I see that you did not forget your calligraphy supplies. Good. You will soon be practicing again.”

“No, I won’t!” Mieko burst out. She shoved the four treasures into a drawer. “The bomb spoiled everything, Grandma. I’ll never, never paint again.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Grandma said, flustered. “Your hand will get better ...”

“But my fingers will always be stiff and awkward like dried-up shrimp,” Mieko said in a small voice. “And my brushstrokes will look like sticks.”

She threw herself onto the futon and pulled the sheet up over her head.

Grandma sighed.

“I’ll write to your parents and tell them that you arrived safely,” she said, turning out the light. “Good-night.”

It was the first time Mieko had ever been away from home alone. She longed for her own bedroom, where her teacher's painting hung on the wall and Mother's peach tree rustled its leaves outside her window.

What if something happened to Mother and Father? What if they got sick and died? What if she never saw them again? Finally, exhausted, Mieko stuffed a pillow against her mouth and cried herself to sleep.

That night she had a nightmare. A plane was droning overhead and then a big bomb exploded in her face. Mieko woke up screaming.

Grandpa knelt by the futon.

"The war is over now," he said, putting his arms around her. "There are no more bombs." But Mieko could not stop the sobs shaking her whole body.

"Shh—shh! You must stop crying," Grandpa whispered. "Your tears will not help those who were killed by the atom bomb. Their souls must swim across the River of Death to heaven. Every tear you shed drops into the river and makes it deeper."

Mieko shuddered, imagining what it would be like to struggle in that icy cold water. Gradually, she became quiet.

Grandpa straightened the bedclothes.

"Enough of dreary thoughts," he said. "Try to sleep like my rock in the garden."

As soon as he was gone Mieko went to the open window. She pushed up her bangs, letting the night air cool her damp forehead. With no moonlight Mieko could barely see Grandpa's rock. She was sorry for it, so awfully alone out there in the swallowing dark. It looked as alone as she felt.