

TWO

GRANDMA'S HOME

Every morning Mieko put on the dress that Grandma had sewn out of an old summer cotton kimono. It had no buttons or belt so that Mieko could easily slip it over her head. Grandma had taken the long-sleeved blouses and baggy trousers that Mieko had brought and put them into the scrapbag.

“I don’t understand why the government made girls wear those hot, prickly outfits,” she said. “Thank goodness the war is over and you can put on decent clothes again.”

She sat back on her heels and looked Mieko up and down.

“Much better,” she said with a satisfied smile. “Yes, Mieko, you look like a girl again.”

There was always much to do around the farm. Grandma never seemed to stop working—cooking, cleaning, sweeping, or mending. Mieko tried to help. She fed the chickens, collected eggs, polished the wooden porch, lit the fire underneath the deep bathtub in the afternoon, and sprinkled water on the cracked dry earth of the road to keep the dust down.

Kitchen work was the most difficult because Mieko’s hand was clumsy and it hurt whenever she tried to hold a knife or spoon. She took a long time slicing eggplants and cucumbers with her left hand.

Once Mieko dropped a whole dish of chopped fish onto the floor. She stood there looking down at the mess, biting her lip.

“I’m not good for anything!” she cried.

Grandma scooped up the fish, talking all the while.

“Never mind, Mieko. It’s just a little thing. When the doctor came last week he said that your hand will soon be as good as new. Then you will have no more accidents. ”

Mieko was silent. She knew it would never be as good as new.

As the summer days dragged on, Mieko worried more and more about school. Her grandparents had not mentioned it, and she hoped that they had forgotten.

But one muggy September morning when they were eating rice and miso soup, Grandma calmly said, “Mieko, you will be going to school next week. ”

Mieko almost dropped the porcelain spoon that she was trying to carry to her mouth. She was not hungry any more.

For several moments there were only the sounds of a farm morning—hens clucking and birds scolding in the garden.

Grandma and Grandpa exchanged worried glances.

“You must go to school,” Grandpa said. “It is important to keep up with your studies.”

Mieko knew all that. But a strange school? With children she did not know? And with a hideous, twisted hand?

“Maybe they won’t like me, ” she said in a low voice.

“Not like you!” Grandma’s bright eyes sent off sparks. “Why would the others not like you? You are a nice girl with good manners and new clothes. ” And she brought out a school uniform, neatly sewn and pressed.

“Here!” She handed it to Mieko. “I made it for a surprise. Go try it on.”

Mieko did not like that kind of surprise. Trembling, she slowly pulled on the navy skirt and white blouse that smelled of camphor.

“I saved these pieces of cloth all through the war, ” Grandma said, giving the skirt a tug to straighten it. She beamed. “A perfect fit.”

Mieko lowered her eyes. “Thank you, Grandma,” she murmured.

The first day of school arrived. That morning, Mieko came into the kitchen, looking a little pale.

“I think I’m getting some kind of germ,” she said, coughing. “My throat is sore. I think I’m coming down with mumps.”

“Open your mouth and say ahhhh, ” Grandma said in, her no-nonsense voice.

She held Mieko’s tongue down with a spoon and peered inside. Then she felt Mieko’s neck.

“Your throat is fine, and your glands are not even the tiniest bit swollen.”

“Do I have to go today?” Mieko pleaded. “Do I, Grandma?”

Grandma paid no attention. She continued stuffing rice into beancurd envelopes that looked like fat sails. Then she packed them neatly into a lunchbox.

“Such heat!” she said, dabbing at her neck with the edge of her apron. “Mieko, don’t walk too fast this morning. ”

“I don’t even know where the school is, ” Mieko said. “And ... and I might get lost.”

“I will take you there on my way to the field, ” Grandpa interrupted.
“Now scoot upstairs and get ready.”

“Don’t forget your art supplies, ” Grandma called, putting a piece of dried fish into the lunchbox for a treat.

Mieko thought it was silly to bring the four treasures when she was not going to use them. But to please Grandma, she stuck them into her black leather schoolbag.

She took such a long time getting ready that Grandpa finally stomped upstairs. Mieko was combing her hair and fussing with her uniform.

“Come on!” he said firmly. “You don’t want to be late on your first day.”

“It is the first day that is so scary,” Mieko wailed. “I will sit in the wrong seat ... say the wrong things ... and everyone will stare at my hand.”

Mieko thought that the new puckered red skin looked even worse than the scabs that were coming off.

But there was no escape. She trudged alongside Grandpa to school, clutching his work-roughened hand all the way. When they got there, she hung back.

“Go on in,” Grandpa said, giving her a gentle push. “You will be all right. ”

Mieko watched him stride away until he turned the corner. For an instant she stood there, paralyzed with fear. Then she took a long, shaky breath and walked slowly through the doorway.