

THREE

SCHOOL

Mieko slipped out of her geta and put them in one of the shoe boxes in the hall. She wiped her moist hands on her skirt and shifted from one foot to the other, waiting for a teacher to come along and direct her to the right classroom. She pictured her teacher looking old and mean.

Out of the corner of her eye Mieko saw the students come in, some laughing, some arm-in-arm. They had lived in the town all their lives and knew each other well. Nobody spoke to Mieko.

It was a pleasant surprise when a pretty young woman introduced herself.

“You must be Mieko,” the teacher said warmly. “Your grandfather told me about you. I am Miss Suzuki. ”

After bowing politely, Mieko followed Miss Suzuki into the classroom to a desk near the back. She gave Mieko a stubby pencil, carefully sharpened at both ends, and some pages of an old newspaper.

“Try to write in the white spaces,” Miss Suzuki said. “I hope we will be getting more supplies now that the war is over. Until then, we must make do.”

As Mieko looked around at all the unsmiling faces, she knew more than ever what loneliness meant.

“We have a new pupil,” the teacher announced. “Mieko, please stand up.”

Her knees shaking, Mieko got to her feet as thirty pairs of eyes gazed at her. She blushed and tried to hide her hand behind her back.

“Let’s make her feel welcome,” Miss Suzuki went on. “She has just come from a town near

Nagasaki, and I expect all of you to help her get acquainted with our school.”

This caused a buzzing in the room. As Mieko sank back into her chair, she heard whispers. “That’s where the big bomb exploded ... Look at her hand ... It makes me sick. ”

Mieko felt smaller than a fly. Just because no bombs had dropped on this part of Japan was no reason to be stupid. She wanted to scream “Stupid!” at them all. But she swallowed the word. Mother had often warned her that a nasty word was like a bird—once it flew out of her mouth it would never fly back. Mieko pressed her lips together so that the word could not escape.

During the morning, Mieko tried hard to concentrate, but Akira made it impossible. He was a skinny boy with stiff short hair that stood up like a brush and he wore black-rimmed glasses.

Whenever Miss Suzuki was not looking, Akira turned around and made faces at Mieko. He crossed his eyes and twisted his mouth into strange shapes. He looked so silly that Mieko almost laughed. But when he hissed, “Monster-hand!” she glared at him.

Mieko heard her mother saying, “Always see beauty, never see ugliness. ” How could anyone see beauty in Akira?

It seemed that the morning would never end. Mieko was so, nervous that she stumbled over her own feet and twice she dropped her book. In history class, she could not remember all the names of the Japanese emperors. Everyone knew those. She did not even try to write, but kept her hands folded in her lap.

During arithmetic, there was a sudden loud noise outside, and Mieko ducked underneath the desk. Almost the moment she did it she felt silly. It was only a truck backfiring, not a bomb exploding. Still, she was shaking. When Akira and some of the others tittered, Mieko wanted to die on the spot.

At that moment Miss Suzuki was pointing to a giant abacus that stood in front of the room. “Mieko,” she was saying, “please come up and work out this problem in multiplication. ” “I ... I didn’t hear the question,” Mieko stammered, her mouth dry.

Miss Suzuki’s voice was disapproving.

“You really must try to pay attention, Mieko.”

Akira went up to the abacus and quickly moved the counters to get the correct answer. On the way back to his seat he gave Mieko a smug look and stuck out his tongue.

“I hope your tongue falls off!” Mieko muttered under her breath.

By lunchtime Mieko’s stomach was in knots. She couldn’t eat one bite of the rice and fish that Grandma had prepared for her. She just sat there, staring at her chopsticks. How could she use them in front of the others? What if she dropped food all over the place? Wouldn’t Akira like that!

As they filed out into the schoolyard, Akira came up behind Mieko and grabbed her schoolbag. He dug into it and pulled out her painting brush. In a flash, he swaggered out into the yard shouting, “Hey!

Look what I’ve got! Monster-hand’s dirty old atom bomb brush!” Mieko turned pale and ran after him, trying to grab her brush. “Give it back!” she screamed. “It’s mine!”

Other boys joined in the game.

“Monster-hand! Monster-hand!” they chanted, tossing the brush from one to the other, always just out of Mieko’s reach.

She felt like crying, but she gritted her teeth, not wanting to cry in front of them.

Suddenly she heard a girl’s voice.

“Stop that! You’re acting like a bunch of babies.”

That ended the trouble. Akira threw the brush to Mieko. The boys shrugged and walked away.

The girl handed Mieko her bag and said, “Don’t let those dumb boys bother you! They are always doing something childish.”

Mieko knew the girl was called Yoshi. She was small and dainty with a red bow in her hair. And she smelled of flowers. Mieko wished that she could be exactly like her—so calm and pretty. Instead, she was upset and hot and sweaty. She was a freak with an ugly hand that seemed to stick out a mile.

Soon a group of girls had gathered around, staring curiously at Mieko and asking questions.

“Did you get that scar from the bomb? What was it like? Were there lots of dead bodies? What did they look like?”

Mieko looked from one to another. She felt hot and dizzy and her legs went rubbery. All at once the ring of faces around her started melting together, and she crumpled to the ground. The girls—suddenly quiet—backed away.