

FIVE

WAITING

Grandma asked nothing of Mieko now. Long before Mieko woke up she would put on her black cotton work pants and shirt, cover her head with a straw hat, and be out in the fields to help Grandpa. He needed help because so many young men had gone to fight in the war and had never come back.

Days were just plain dull, like strips of dried old seaweed. Mieko escaped into her thoughts, building a wall around herself the way a turtle builds its shell. She was always looking back, thinking about home.

Sometimes she scolded the hens to keep them from pecking holes in the paper panes of the sliding doors. Or she watched spiders spin their webs between the rocks underneath the porch. Mieko was like the snail that lumbered slowly toward the shade. Trapped inside and silent.

She would sit on the springy tatami in the living room for hours, studying the scroll painting in the alcove. Grandma changed it with the seasons, so this one showed trees in fall colors, and a poem written with graceful strokes.

I thought I saw the fluttering, leaves arise, Returning to their branches; No, it was only butterflies!

Before long, Mieko had memorized the calligraphy and could make a copy of it in her head. She remembered when her own brushstrokes had been good enough to hang on the wall.

Mieko avoided talking with anyone. The few times when Grandma had afternoon tea with a friend, Mieko would escape to the nearby beach. Someone had left a length of huge clay sewer pipe there, and its cool, shadowy interior was her secret hideaway. On the sandy floor she scratched out word-pictures with a stick—Mother, Father, and Home.

The sunshine was sparkling on the blue ocean, fishermen were hanging and mending their nets, sand crabs were skittering across the shore, and sea birds were swooping down for their dinner. But Mieko saw none of it. She couldn't see anything but her own loneliness.

Another letter arrived from Mother, this time for Grandpa and Grandma. Mieko leaned over Grandpa's shoulder as he read parts of it aloud. Mother said they were planning to come to the farm after the New Year holidays and take Mieko home.

Mieko's spirits sank. New Year's Day seemed like years away instead of just a few months.

There was a special note at the end for her:

Mieko dear, is your hand still very painful? By now you must be writing with a pencil. How is the brush-painting coming along? You haven't yet told us about school. Write soon.

Love, Mother.

Mieko did not dare look at Grandpa and Grandma. She was ashamed. How could she write about school? Or new friends? Or painting? A lump came into her throat and she ran outside. Leaning against the side of the house, Mieko could hear voices from the living room.

"That girl keeps too much to herself." Grandma sounded anxious. "It is as though a wicked goblin has taken over her soul. She hardly smiles, and whenever anyone drops in, Mieko disappears as fast as a boiled egg slips off chopsticks. And she will not pick up a brush—or even a pencil."

Grandpa spoke calmly. "When she is ready, Mieko will go back to school. "

After a long silence, he added, "A young girl in trouble should be left alone. Only Mieko can heal her inner self. We cannot do that for her."

"I suppose so," Grandma said with a deep sigh.

Mieko swallowed hard. She was making her grandparents unhappy, too.

In the morning the doctor arrived. He was surprised at the change in Mieko.

"My goodness, you don't look at all like the skinny girl who arrived in August. The farm food must do you good." He leaned toward Mieko. "But I don't like that long face. A little happiness would help you grow up into a pretty young lady."

Mieko blushed and managed a tiny smile.

"That's better, " he said, touching her hand and moving the fingers. "Now, you should be painting and writing to loosen up those stiff muscles."

"Is she all right?" asked Grandma, coming in from the kitchen, still carrying the radish she was chopping up for pickles. "Can she go back to school?"

He nodded and got up to leave. Mieko's eyes moved from one to the other. The tightness in her throat almost choked her.

"But I never want to go back!"

"Never is a long, long time," the doctor said, his eyebrows drawn together in a frown. "You have a good mind, Mieko, and a talent for calligraphy. They will not develop if you stay home and sulk."

“Nobody sees my mind.” Mieko’s voice trembled. “They see only my ugly hand. And I am not sulking.”

“I don’t know what to do with her,” Grandma said helplessly.

When the doctor spoke, his voice was stern. “Mieko, you can be a bitter person all your life, but you are only hurting yourself and your family. Hatred will grow in your heart like a bad weed until there is no room for love or beauty.”

“I don’t care!” Mieko shouted, running out the door.

Tears stinging her eyes, she ran past the quiet neighborhood farmhouses and climbed up the mountain. The path wound around oddly shaped rocks and over grassy slopes. Mieko did not stop until she reached a stream partway up. Hot and tired, she flopped down and dabbled her fingers in the cool water.

The air was quiet and dry as a rice cracker. Mieko rested her head on the mossy bank, listening to the slow droning of insects and the trickling of the water over pebbles.

Suddenly, there was a rustling nearby. It was a queer sound—not very far from her. Mieko remembered the stories she had heard about the red-faced Tengu, the demon that lived in mountains. It was said that he had wings and claws and a long, long nose. He carried bad children into his cave and they were never seen, again.

If that were true, Mieko thought, the Tengu would get her for sure. She began to think that perhaps she had been a little bad lately. Mieko counted the bad things: she worried her grandparents, stayed home from school, was rude to the doctor, hated almost everyone, and did not even try to paint or write a letter home. It was quite a lot.

Mieko held her breath and listened.

The spooky sound came again—a sort of whirring of wings.

She scrambled to her feet and scurried down the twisty path as fast as her legs could go.