

SIX

YOSHI

As Mieko rushed headlong down the mountain she almost bumped into someone.

It was Yoshi.

In a yellow dress and matching bow in her black hair, Yoshi looked like a butterfly. For a few seconds Mieko was too stunned to say anything.

“What’s the matter?” Yoshi asked. “Why are you running? You look scared to death.”

When Mieko could get her breath, she pointed toward the mountain. “Up there,” she panted, “near the stream. A Tengu was chasing me.”

“Are you sure?” Yoshi asked, her eyes full of smiles. “We have no Tengu around here. At least, I don’t think so.”

Mieko’s cheeks turned pink.

“I ... I honestly did hear something. ”

“Probably some small animal.” Yoshi looked curiously at Mieko. “Why don’t you come to school anymore?”

“The doctor told Grandma that I needed a rest, ” Mieko said softly. “We thought that you didn’t like any of us at school. ”

“But I thought ... ” stammered Mieko, “I thought you might not like me.”

An awkward silence fell between them.

Finally, Mieko said, “Well ... I guess I should be getting back home.”

Yoshi nodded and followed Mieko down the mountain. When they came to Mieko's yard, Grandma was sliding clothes off the bamboo clothes-line into a basket.

"Hello!" Grandma waved. "Come in and sit down." She served them a special treat of bean cakes. Grandma asked Yoshi many questions, but Mieko sat silently sipping her tea.

Between bites of the light-as-air crispy pastry filled with sweet bean-jam, Yoshi told Grandma all about herself and school.

"My parents were killed when I was a baby," she said, "so I live with my aunt and uncle."

Mieko stared at her in surprise. She had imagined that Yoshi was the luckiest girl in the world who had absolutely everything. She wondered how Yoshi could smile and be nice all the time when she had lost her family.

She accompanied Yoshi to the gate and watched her walk toward home.

In the days that followed, Mieko lingered outside, hoping to see Yoshi again. But she didn't see her until a week later. Mieko and Grandma were buying tea in the grocery shop when Yoshi came in.

"Aunt Hisako sent me for some tea," she told Mieko .

"We came for the same thing," Mieko said, smiling. They walked together back to Grandma's house. "Would you like to see my room?" Mieko asked shyly. "Well ... sure. I guess."

Upstairs, Mieko wanted to show Yoshi something, but she had no special clothes or pretty dolls. She hesitated, then opened a drawer and brought out her four treasures: the inkstone, inkstick, brush and roll of rice paper.

Yoshi ran her fingers over the lily that was carved into the inkstone. Then she stroked the bristles of the brush.

“What fine art supplies!” she exclaimed with admiration. “You must be good at painting.”

Mieko did not answer. She put the treasures away. She could not bear to tell Yoshi about how she had lost the fifth treasure. Mieko was sure that Yoshi would not like a girl with so much hatred inside of her.

To change the subject, Mieko took Yoshi to the garden where they puzzled over the words on Grandpa’s rock.

As Yoshi was leaving, she asked, “Are you going to school tomorrow?”

Mieko wasn’t sure she was ready for school, but she didn’t want to say no to Yoshi.

“Maybe.”

By suppertime she had made up her mind. Mieko stopped eating her noodle soup and said, “I think I’ll go to school tomorrow.”

Her grandparents looked up, surprised.

“Grandpa,” Mieko went on, her dark eyes serious. “I’m beginning to understand the words on your rock. They mean that I should not worry about my scar, or about going back to school.”

He pulled her close to him.

“I do believe you are becoming wise,” he said with a chuckle. “You are learning to accept things you cannot change. And most important, you are accepting yourself—scars and all.”

After the dishes were washed and put away, they sat and talked—all smiling—until the stars came out.

At bedtime Mieko stared at her face in the mirror. It was plain and round, framed by black hair and bangs. That was all. Mieko wished that a tiny bit of goodness showed in her face like it did in Yoshi's.

This time, as she was falling asleep, there was no sick feeling at the thought of school, and her throat was not so tight. It was as if she was coming into the light after being in a dark tunnel. Maybe everything was going to be all right.