

SEVEN

THE CONTEST

As soon as Mieko entered the classroom, she knew that something was different. Everyone was smiling—except Akira, who scowled at her from his new place in the front row under the teacher’s nose.

“We are happy to see you back, Mieko,” Miss Suzuki said pleasantly, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“We’ve been studying the atom bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” one of the girls said. “You must have been brave.”

Mieko felt the bitterness inside of her beginning to disappear like the early morning mist.

After that, school went surprisingly well. Mieko managed to write her lessons with a pencil. Miss Suzuki looked pleased. In composition class, Mieko wrote her first letter home.

Dear Mother and Father,

I have a new friend, Yoshi, and I like school. My hand is still sore, so my writing isn’t good. I haven’t painted with my brush yet. I miss you, too.

Love, Mieko

One day, in her bedroom, Mieko opened the drawer and brought out her four treasures. Sitting on a cushion, she rubbed the inkstick onto the wetted inkstone. When the ink was black and thick enough, Mieko picked up the brush and began to make the stroke for “one.” She felt like a small child learning to write for the first time.

Holding a pencil hadn't hurt much, but a flash of pain went through her hand when she pressed the brush hard onto the paper. Mieko caught her breath and finished the stroke. She frowned at the crooked line. It didn't look at all like the graceful bone stroke that she had made perfectly countless times before.

Grandma came in and bent over for a look. Mieko tried to cover the paper, but Grandma had already seen the sloppy "one."

"Here." Grandma took the brush and smoothly painted the stroke. "So—that is the way it goes," she said. "Now you try again."

Without a word, Mieko cleaned the brush and inkstone and put the four treasures away. Of course she knew how the stroke should look. Why didn't Grandma know that?

Mieko and Yoshi began spending more and more time together.

"You girls are as close as a pair of chopsticks," Grandpa said.

Sometimes, after school, Mieko took Yoshi to her secret place. Inside the pipe they sat and watched the hermit crabs skittering crazily around on the sand. Or they collected tiny shells, and pebbles worn smooth by the waves.

They wandered up the mountain, gathering yellow and gold leaves for Grandma and for Yoshi's Aunt Hisako. Mieko loved the mellow autumn colors that spread over the earth and trees. Often they flung themselves down onto the grass, looking at the sky, trying to find animals in the puffy clouds. Mieko was forgetting the loneliness that used to bring her to the mountain and to the shore.

All the while they kept an eye out for Tengu.

"He has probably gone underground for the winter," Yoshi said with a giggle. As they raced back down the mountain, they sang,

“Tengu’s nose grows and grows. Tengu’s feet—red as a beet!”

The folktale demon became their private joke. During dull history classes they passed notes to each other, adding more lines to their song. Then they hid their faces behind their books and tried not to laugh.

There was a touch of winter in the air when Miss Suzuki made an announcement.

“Our school is having a calligraphy contest on the last day before the New Year’s holidays. It will be for those students who paint word-pictures with a brush. At the last minute, I will write the contest word on the blackboard. The one who paints the word with the most artistic brushstrokes will win. Those brushstrokes will be copied onto a brass square and fastened to the big rock in the schoolyard.”

“Let’s enter the contest!” Yoshi said eagerly.

Mieko shook her head. How could she think of entering a contest when she couldn’t even paint the easiest strokes?

“Please!” coaxed Yoshi. “It will be fun. Besides, none of us had calligraphy lessons during the war, and you studied brush-painting for a long time.” She pulled on Mieko’s sleeve. “You have a better chance to win than any of us.”

“Oh, yes!” Mieko thought bitterly. “I’ve had lessons, but they are all wasted.”

She glanced at Yoshi’s delicate fingers. How could she compete against someone like her? And all the others with their perfect hands? Worst of all, Mieko knew that she would never win without the special magic of the fifth treasure.

But Yoshi talked about the contest all the way home and into Mieko's yard. Grandma was washing clothes in a big tub. She lifted a shirt, then slapped it hard against the washboard to get the dirt out. Slap! Slap!

"There's an art contest at school," Yoshi told her, "and I think Mieko should try." Grandma stopped working, her wet red hands on her hips. "I think so, too." She looked hard at Mieko. "Your parents would be so proud ... " "No!" Mieko said quickly. "I'm not ready." She paused. "I ... I can't."

And that was the end of it. At least, so Mieko thought.