

NINE

FRIENDSHIP

There was one thing about the contest that Mieko did not understand. It buzzed around in her head like a pesky fly all through breakfast.

“You are unusually quiet,” Grandpa said. “What’s on your mind?”

“Well ...” Mieko tried to explain. “If two students paint the contest word the same way, who will win?”

Grandpa rubbed the gray stubble on his chin.

“I don’t think that is possible,” he said slowly. “The wetness, dryness, and speed of one artist’s brushstrokes will be different from anyone else’s. Painting a word-picture is much like playing the piano. No two expert musicians will play a piece of music in exactly the same way.”

He opened Aunt Hisako’s book and pointed out some of the masterpieces of calligraphy.

“Here is the word-picture for ‘happiness.’ It looks quite different when painted by two great artists, doesn’t it? They each have a fifth treasure, but their own personalities and styles show up in their work.

Mieko pored over the pages.

“You must paint not what the eye sees,” Grandpa said, “but what the heart knows. If your heart has beauty, so will your painting. Do you understand?”

Mieko nodded. “Sort of.” Grandpa smiled broadly.

“Does your question mean that you will enter the contest?”

“Yes, Grandpa,” she said, not telling him her reasons.

Grandma turned from the sink. She came over and held out her arms. Mieko buried her face in the clean-smelling apron and hugged Grandma hard.

“That’s my brave girl!” Grandma said. “Imagine how proud your parents will be to see your brushstrokes on that brass square!”

Mieko was silent. She wondered if the family would be proud of her even when she lost. Because she surely would.

That same afternoon she and Yoshi began to work on their brushstrokes. Yoshi opened Aunt Hisako’s book at the beginning so that they could copy the Japanese word-pictures of the masters.

They sat on their knees with sheets of newspaper spread out on the floor before them. They covered the papers with rows of black strokes. Some were like teardrops, others like mouse tails, stork legs, tiger paws, swords and bones. They made hundreds of them.

Yoshi painted with small, neat, even strokes. But Mieko’s were large—thick and thin, fast and slow—sweeping across the page. To make up for the stiffness in her hand, she used her whole body while painting.

While they worked, Mieko told Yoshi stories about the word-pictures. Her old art teacher had always told stories during class.

“Here are the two parts of the word-picture for house,” Mieko said, drawing the strokes. “The first part means ‘roof’ and the second means ‘pig.’ ”

Yoshi laughed, delighted.

“Imagine putting a pig inside of a house!”

“My teacher said that in the old days people did keep pigs in their houses,” Mieko said. “And that is why we draw the word-picture like this.”

Yoshi made a face.

“Ugh! Thank goodness we don’t have pigs inside anymore”

“And look at this!” Mieko quickly painted the word-picture for “love.”

“One part means ‘woman’ and the other stands for ‘child,’ ” she explained. “Put three women together and we get a word- picture that means ‘noise.’ See?”

“I never thought of that!” Yoshi exclaimed. “But it isn’t fair. Three men are noisy, too!”

Between the stories and the practicing, the days flew by.

Soon the rains turned to icy sleet that sounded like thunder on the roof. In the dark, frosty hours after school, Mieko and Yoshi often moved to a low table that had a kotatsu heater underneath it.

Grandma had placed a quilt over the table to keep the warmth in. They put their cold hands and feet under the quilt until they thawed out. Then they went back to practicing.

Grandma kept a plate of cookies nearby.

“To keep your strength up,” she said, her eyes crinkled in a smile.

She sat beside them with her knitting basket. The steady click, click of her needles made quiet music. Sometimes she shooed Yoshi and Mieko outside for a breath of fresh air and some exercise.

“You must give your eyes a rest,” she said wisely.

In their heavy coats, mittens, boots and scarves, they went out into the yard where there was a sprinkling of snow. It glinted like diamonds in

the soft light that shone through the paper-paned doors. Even out there Mieko grabbed a stick and made strokes in the snow until Yoshi stopped her.

“This is play time!” she yelled. “I’ll race you to the comer!”

Slipping and sliding along the icy road, they shouted their Tengu song.

“Tengu’s nose grows and grows, Tengu’s feet—red as a beet. Tengu’s paws have awful claws, Tengu’s head—full of lead!”

Weak with laughter, Mieko and Yoshi fell down in a tangled heap of arms and legs.

TEN

HOPE

One evening, Mieko was struggling with the difficult strokes for “feast.” She tried again and again, but they didn’t come out right. Mieko tried thinking about good food—moon buns with bits of pork inside, buckwheat noodles, fried beef and vegetables—until her mouth watered. All at once her brush fairly flew over the paper.

Mieko sat back and studied the word-picture. It was better. The door to her private magical world was opening just a crack. Perhaps a little bit of beauty had crept back into her heart. But would enough of the fifth treasure come back to make the strokes perfect and full of feeling? In time for the contest?

There was only one way to find out. Practice. And Mieko decided to work as hard as she could, even when her hand ached terribly. Then, if the fifth treasure did not return, she would give up calligraphy forever.

Sometimes she turned out two or three almost correct word-pictures in a day. Other times she felt like crying when the strokes were all wrong: the ink was too thick, or too thin, or one stroke was wiggly, or the whole thing was lopsided like a leaky boat.

At bedtime, Grandpa adjusted his glasses and inspected Mieko's practice papers. He held them out at arm's length, then in close for a more careful look. He compared her brushstrokes to those in Aunt Hisako's book.

"Hm-m-m," he said. "That teardrop is too fat ... the sword must have a sharper edge ... the

elephant's leg should be stronger. And remember that all parts of a word-picture must fit together the way parts of your body fit."

Mieko sagged. It seemed hopeless, but the next day she continued practicing.

The class was growing more excited as the contest drew near. Miss Suzuki asked the artists to bring samples of their painting to school. As the papers were passed around, everyone admired Mieko's large, artistic brushstrokes—even Akira.

"Phew!" he whistled. "I wouldn't work that hard for a million yen!"

He grinned at Mieko and she smiled back. She thought that he really had a nice smile when he wasn't making nasty faces.

However, in spite of the long practice hours, Mieko knew that there was still something missing from her word-pictures.

Even Grandpa agreed.

“Your word-pictures are correct,” he said, thoughtfully, “but somehow they seem to lack the spark of life. It is almost as if they were printed by a machine.”

Two fat tears squeezed out of Mieko’s eyes and rolled down her cheeks. All of her work was for nothing.

“It’s no use!” she cried. “The fifth treasure is gone for good.”

Grandpa leaned close. “The fifth treasure isn’t something you can lose, like misplacing a shoe or sock.”

“But ever since the bomb ... ”

Grandpa reached over and wiped away her tears.

“That bomb hurt many people, Mieko. And it hurt your hand. But what’s inside of you—the bomb cannot touch that. Perhaps you are trying too hard. The solution might be to give yourself and your brush a rest.”

“I can’t!” cried Mieko. “The contest is only a few days away.”

He cupped her face in his strong hands and looked deeply into her eyes.

“Listen, Mieko dear. You would not be able to dance well if you had just raced a mile, would you? It is the same with calligraphy. You must be fresh to give it your best.”

Mieko drew a deep breath. “All right,” she said wearily.

The next day she took a vacation from painting. She tried to put the contest out of her mind and think only about the New Year’s celebrations. Mieko helped Grandma clean the house so that every speck of dust would be gone before the next year began.

In the afternoon a letter arrived from home.

Dear Mieko,

I do hope you will enter the contest. The practice will be good for your hand. And I know that the beauty in your heart will again blossom like the peach tree in our garden. Then your brush will feel as though it is dancing across the paper. I'm sure of it—as sure as bamboo bends in the wind.

Love, Mother

Mieko read the letter many times. She read it in her room and at school. But she was still unsure of herself. She couldn't believe her brush would ever dance across the paper again. Deep down, her worries about the fifth treasure grew.

ELEVEN

THE TREASURE

The night before the contest, Mieko dreamed that the family was once more together. They were having a picnic under a cherry tree that was blooming like a pink cloud. Mieko was writing a poem about the flowers with her brush. And the word-pictures were full of life.

Gusts of wind began rustling the branches with a whish, whish, whish. When morning came, the sound of rustling turned into a sweeping. Grandma's broom was scraping against the floor of the entrance hall.

Mieko tried to burrow back into her wonderful dream. But it was gone. Shivering in the cold, she hurriedly pulled on her clothes.

She had just gulped down her breakfast when Yoshi came by. Her face was rosy from the cold and the excitement. Yoshi was holding something behind her back.

“Guess what I’ve got!” she said, hopping on one foot, then the other, trying not to tell the secret. Mieko couldn’t help laughing.

“I can’t guess.”

“Then close your eyes,” ordered Yoshi, “while I take off the wrapping.”

Mieko covered her eyes. There was the crackling of paper. Too curious to wait, Mieko peeked. Yoshi was unrolling a sheet of hand-made rice paper.

“Ohhh!” Mieko breathed. She was certain that it was the finest paper made in all of Japan. It was pale cream with a few nubby threads running through. She felt a twinge of jealousy.

“Wherever did you get it, Yoshi?”

“Aunt Hisako. She ordered it from a store in Tokyo.” “I’m glad for you.” Mieko choked out the words.

Yoshi’s eyes twinkled when she said, “The paper is not for me.” She laughed at Mieko’s open-mouthed surprise. “It’s for you.”

Mieko stood there—stunned—and ashamed of her jealousy.

Yoshi smiled. “You’re the one with the real talent, Mieko. My brushstrokes are just plain and ordinary.

“But—” Mieko began to argue. “But you can’t ... ”

“No more buts!” Yoshi broke in. “All I want is for you to use this paper. Aunt Hisako said so. Promise!”

When Mieko hesitated, Yoshi stuck out her hand. “Promise!”

Finally, Mieko nodded and they crooked little fingers as they always did to seal a promise.

At school, desks in Miss Suzuki's classroom had been cleared away so that the artists could sit on cushions at low tables. The twenty contestants filed in silently and sat down.

All eyes were on the blackboard where Miss Suzuki would write the contest word.

Mieko's hands shook as she arranged the inkstone, waterholder, inkstick and brush on the table. As she ground the ink, the rhythmic rub, rub, rub calmed her, and she stopped trembling. Then Mieko spread out the soft white paper.

Miss Suzuki wrote the word:

friendship

At that moment the classroom seemed to fade as Mieko concentrated on the word. Inside her magical world—a world where lines and shapes came to life—she saw only the paper and her brush. In her mind's eye she pictured each stroke. Friendship was Yoshi.

All of Mieko's love for her went into the strong, sure brushstrokes. And every one of the fifteen strokes had the energy of a living thing.

Mieko painted the word so quickly that it was as though her hand had been guided. And the brush really did dance across the paper—just as it used to.

Floating in a dream, Mieko put her paper on Miss Suzuki's desk, put on her warm coat, and walked out of the room.

She stood in the quiet schoolyard, the cold air on her cheeks. Happiness washed over her. She had the fifth treasure again. There was no doubt.

Yoshi ran up and grabbed her arm.

“What happened? Why do you look so strange?”

Her eyes shining, Mieko said, “The brush danced. It really did.”

“I bet you win!” shrieked Yoshi.

“If I do,” Mieko said quietly, “it will be thanks to you. When I thought of friendship, I thought of you. That’s what I painted. ”

Yoshi put her hand on top of the big rock as they walked past it.

“If you win, and your brushstrokes are on this rock,” she said sadly, “everyone will always remember you. Especially me.” She squeezed Mieko’s arm. “I’ll miss you a lot.”

Mieko blinked away the tears that came when she thought of leaving her best friend.

“When I got here, all I wanted was to go back home. Now it’s hard to leave.”

“But we can write letters,” said Yoshi, brightening. “And maybe you can come back for the summer holidays. ”

“Yes!” cried Mieko. “And we can go to the beach and hide in our secret place ... ”

“And look for Tengu again!” added Yoshi.

They burst out laughing. Then, hand-in-hand, they hurried home through the softly falling snow.

Author’s Note

When writing developed in China and Japan thousands of years ago, people did not use letters as we know them but pictures to explain what they meant. The pictures, which today are called “characters,” have changed very little over the centuries. They are made up of strokes which, in everyday writing, are produced with pens or pencils.

But the Japanese believe that picture-writing with a brush can be great art, and this is the kind of artist Mieko wanted to be.

Many Japanese characters still look almost like what they mean.

“Mountain” looks like a mountain:

And “tree” looks something like a tree:

Other words, like “friendship,” are more complicated. The everyday way to write “friendship” is like this:

When painted with a brush, the word-picture looks like this:

This is how the word-picture looked when Mieko put her feelings for Yoshi into the prizewinning brushstrokes.