

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 wish, wish, wish. 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.