

EIGHT

AUNT HISAKO

One crisp fall day, Yoshi announced, "I'm having a tea party on Sunday. And I want you to come."

Mieko was wildly excited. She was sure Yoshi's house would be like a castle in a fairy tale.

On the special day Grandma did not go out to the fields to help Grandpa harvest rice. Instead, she stayed home to make certain that Mieko was properly dressed for the important occasion. She tied a blue ribbon in Mieko's hair, knotting it so tightly that Mieko yelled. Grandma puffed out the bow and smoothed Mieko's best skirt.

"Mieko, where is your clean hankie?"

Mieko pulled it from her pocket.

"Don't forget to use it," Grandma said. She gave one last pat to the dress. "There! You are ready." At Yoshi's house Mieko stood in front of the tall closed gate. Off to one side was a small door.

After a few minutes Mieko worked up enough courage to knock lightly on it. At first there was silence. Mieko knocked louder.

Soon she heard the clatter of geta inside the yard.

"It's me, Mieko," she called, giving a polite bow even though nobody could see her.

The small door opened and Yoshi stuck her head out. "I knew it was you," she said, laughing. "Come on in."

At the entrance the girls removed their clogs and donned slippers to walk down the hall. As they flip-flopped along, Mieko's big slippers

kept falling off. She was glad when they reached the sliding door of the living room so that she could step barefoot onto the tatami.

Mieko caught her breath with wonder. The room was so big—eight mats! Silk cushions were waiting near a low table. Mieko’s mouth watered when she saw cookies and cakes beside a teapot and matching cups. She hoped they could eat soon.

“Do sit down,” Yoshi said in a grown-up hostess voice.

Mieko tucked her feet under her and sat opposite Yoshi. At home she sometimes sprawled, but here she was extra ladylike so as not to shame Grandma.

In the silence the clock on the wall ticked loudly. Mieko looked at the pictures that hung in the alcove and above the door. She liked the black ink dragon best. The artist’s brushstrokes flicked and skipped across the paper, making the dragon come alive. Mieko could almost feel the heat from its fiery breath.

The other painting was a poem in calligraphy that said, “In the midst of the world’s corruption, a heart of pure white jade.”

Mieko wondered what corruption meant.

Suddenly, Yoshi said, “We don’t have to be so quiet. It’s just us, alone.”

Mieko grinned, and soon they were eating the sweets and chattering about school.

Mieko had crammed the last cake into her mouth when a slim, elegant woman padded into the room. She was dressed in a green silk kimono with peonies on it and a brocade sash that glittered with gold threads. Her glossy black hair was pulled back into a soft bun.

Mieko stared at her face—so beautiful and smooth, as if she did have a heart of pure white jade.

“Aunt Hisako, this is my best friend, Mieko,” Yoshi said.

Aunt Hisako flashed a cool smile in Mieko’s direction and lowered herself gracefully onto a cushion.

“When you have finished eating, little stranger, you may call me Aunt Hisako,” she said primly. “By the way, young ladies in this house chew each bite thirty times.”

While the girls chewed and chewed, Aunt Hisako asked Mieko, “What is your favorite subject at school?”

Mieko had lost count of the chewing, but she was sure that she had done at least thirty, so she swallowed and answered, “The reading class, Aunt Hisako.”

Mieko’s leg began to go numb and she tried hard not to wriggle. When she could not stand the pins and needles tingling any longer, Mieko sneaked a hand down and rubbed her leg.

Aunt Hisako’s eyebrows lifted disapprovingly. She began to talk about calligraphy, using big words that Mieko did not understand.

“Do you paint word-pictures?” Mieko asked meekly.

“Heavens no!” Aunt Hisako replied in her deep voice. “I am only a scholar of brush-painting. In other words, I study the work of famous writing masters. It gives me great pleasure.” She fixed her eyes on Mieko. “I suppose you will try to win the school contest, too?”

Mieko shook her head.

“I’m too clumsy.”

“Nonsense!” Aunt Hisako threw up her pale hands. “Clumsiness is in your mind. Besides, your hand looks almost completely healed. So that is no excuse.”

“But ... ” began Mieko, wondering how best to explain to Aunt Hisako about the lost fifth treasure.

“Little stranger,” Aunt Hisako said, “have you not heard of the holy priest, Kobo Daishi, who could paint the most exquisite word-pictures? And not only with his right hand.”

Mieko shook her head.

“With his left hand,” Aunt Hisako continued, “or holding a brush between the toes of his right foot, or between the toes of his left foot, or even between his teeth.”

Mieko was speechless, trying to imagine what the priest looked like painting with his feet.

“If he can do that, little stranger,” Aunt Hisako said sharply, “you can surely paint with one hand.”

Mieko shifted uneasily on the cushion, wishing that she had not come. She wondered how long she would have to live in the village before Aunt Hisako stopped calling her a stranger.

“Nothing in life is easy,” Aunt Hisako said, rising to her feet. “You don’t want to be a coward, do you?”

A coward!

The word thudded inside of Mieko’s head. For the first time in weeks the old tightness was back in her throat. She sat there with her head bowed.

“Why don’t you look at me?” asked Aunt Hisako. “Do I scare you?”

“A little,” Mieko said in a low voice. “But I have seen lots of other frightening things.” Aunt Hisako almost smiled.

“So I am a frightening thing?”

Mieko didn’t know what to say.

Aunt Hisako turned, saying, “It’s time for my nap.” As she wafted out of the room she pulled a book from a shelf in the corner. She opened it to show them an illustration, then closed it with a snap that made Mieko jump.

“You may take this book home,” Aunt Hisako said. “If you study the brushstrokes on these pages, and practice, one of you might win the prize. Remember, a gem, unless polished, does not glitter.”

“Thank you, Aunt Hisako,” the girls said in chorus, bowing until their heads almost touched the tatami.

After she left, Yoshi said, “I’m really sorry. Aunt Hisako sounds terrifying, but she only wants to help.”

On the way home Mieko thought about what Aunt Hisako had said. She didn’t want to be a coward. But how could she try to win the contest without the fifth treasure?

She dutifully told Grandma every detail about Yoshi’s grand house and the tea party and Aunt Hisako—everything except the coward part.

But that night she lay awake for a long time. She couldn’t forget what Aunt Hisako had said.

As her eyes were closing, Mieko whispered, “I will enter the contest. Even if I have no chance of winning. That will show her I’m not a coward.”