

Twenty-Four Eyes, Part III

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

According to the caption, it's September. Summer is over.

Waves crash on the shore as Miss Oishi walks her bike by the sea. She ducks to avoid a giant wave – but she gets soaked anyway! It looks like there is damage caused by a storm the night before. A tall telephone pole tilts precariously. On the sloping roof of a house, men are bent over, repairing tiles.

Along the way, Miss Oishi sees the children in front of a house cleaning up debris from the storm and she stops to help them. She wears her suit, while the children are dressed in kimonos and zori sandals made of rice straw.

They gather up pieces of broken wood and toss fallen stones into the sea.

“Is it always like this after a storm?” Miss Oishi asks.

“*Hai!*” they answer.

“You all help clear the stones from the road?”

“*Hai!*”

A voice from off-screen calls, “Teacher!”

Tanko comes running up. “How's Nikuta?” Miss Oishi asks.

“The walls of his house fell in. He was in his closet, soaked.”

Mat-chan says with a big smile, “We could see inside. He sat in the closet looking up at the sky.” To these kids, that sounds like a fun adventure.

“In the closet?” Miss Oishi is puzzled.

Ma-chan chimes in, “He was trying to take the emperor's place.”

Everyone laughs.

At that, a woman in a headscarf runs up, complaining, “Young lady! What's so funny? Other people's misfortune?”

She goes on angrily, “My husband fell off the roof. I suppose that's funny too!”

Miss Oishi is mortified. “I'm sorry!”

“Then why laugh when others suffer? Making the kids clear the path! Well, not near my house! You just want it cleared for your bike! Well, you can do it yourself! Humph!” She storms off in a huff.

Encountering a man at work, the woman says, “A teacher cackling at others' misfortune! I set her straight!”

Miss Oishi, her hands on the shoulders of two of her pupils, is downcast. The group stands sadly, in silence.

Finally Miss Oishi puts on a smile. “Let's stop now,” she says. “It seems I got carried away. Let's go to the seashore.”

As they walk along the rocky shore, the boys throw stones into the water. The line of children follows the curve of the waves, which send up great clouds of spray as they break on the rocks.

The horizon cuts the image in two: the churning sea below, a calm and endless sky above.

Some of the older children who were helping clear the road in front of the house have joined the group. The children lean on an old boat and sing a whimsical song called “Barber in a Hurry” about a rabbit who goes for a haircut from a barber who is a crab.

Away from the group, three boys squat on the sand, digging very intently. A line of stone Buddhas watches them.

At last, one of the boys yells, “Teacher!” The group turns to see. “We found a rare seashell. Come look!”

“What kind?” she asks.

“Come look!” one of the boys insists, and she runs toward him.

Suddenly, she trips and plunges into the sand. The mischief makers jump with glee at the success of their prank, while the other children laugh with delight.

Struggling to get up, Miss Oishi collapses into the hole that she tripped on. She lays flat on the sand, resting her face on her arm. Alarmed, the children run toward her. The three boys stop their jumping.

Miss Oishi begins to cry softly, followed by the loud wailing of some of the girls.

“It’s all right,” Miss Oishi says. “Go get the other teacher. Tell him I broke my leg and can’t walk.” Some children run off to get help.

We see them run past fishing nets hung out to dry, docked boats and houses. They call out, “Miss Pebble is hurt! Miss Pebble is hurt! Somebody come with us!”

Finally, they are within sight of the school, still calling, “Someone come help!” Their little legs run so fast!

In the rear of the shot, the schoolhouse seems a haven of peace and protection.

In a slow procession, Miss Oishi lies on a cart pulled by men from the village, with the senior teacher close by. The children follow, singing the sad song of abandonment that now acts as a bit of a foreshadow:

Mother Crow, why do you cry?

Because I left

My seven precious babies

Back on the mountain

After they have passed, the woman in the headscarf who had scolded Miss Oishi gazes after them.

Pulling the cart, one man comments, “I don’t think it’s broken. But she needs a doctor or masseur.”

“Take her to Dr. Soka in Nakamachi,” suggests the senior teacher.

“It’d be quicker by boat.”

“Not in this weather.”

The procession advances solemnly through the sparse landscape, under a brooding sky.

In the darkened schoolroom, lit by a single lantern, the senior teacher is practicing the harmonium and singing. Marking time with her arm, his wife is coaching him – and he is not doing very well. She comments, “With Miss Oishi out, it’s more work for you.”

“Oh, she’s got it worse,” he replies. “Her mother’s furious about the whole thing. She says her daughter is irreplaceable and she won’t send her to this miserable village again.”

“I don’t blame her.” Turning to practicalities, his wife adds, “We need a substitute. I’m tired of teaching sewing in her place. I have no time to make money on side work.” She sighs.

“Enough talk. I’d better practice. I’ve got to learn this.”

Once again, we see a beautifully composed shot of the schoolyard, its gridded wall guiding the eye to the serene sea in the background. We hear the senior teacher singing.

Inside, the children face him, sitting politely in rows, as he beats his hand on the desk, in time to the music.

He suggests, "Let's all sing together, okay?"

Some children do join in, but quickly give up.

"Why aren't you singing?" he asks, desperately. "I've done all I can. You won't learn if you don't try."

He has an idea: "Everybody on your feet. Stand up. Here we go." He begins to sing and the children join him, but without the vigor that Miss Oishi inspires.

"You're impossible. Sing whatever you want," he says in disgust. Still, they end up singing the school song he suggests. It's not like the children's songs that Miss Oishi teaches; the children join in, obediently, reluctantly and a little sadly.

From above, we see children run among bare trees, a landscape of pale earth and spidery branches.

Two by two, they walk along, talking.

"I hate that music class," says one. "I like Miss Pebble's songs better."

"When's she coming back?"

"I wish I could see her face."

"She's in the hospital."

"She was, but she's out now."

"Maybe she'll be back soon."

"I hope so."

"She can't even stand up yet."

"Let's all go visit her."

"Yeah, let's go to her village."

They look at each other for a moment. Then, wordlessly, they head off down the hill.

In an extreme long shot, we see them hurry onto the cape, small vulnerable creatures. Reaching the water's edge, they stand and gaze out to sea.

Sonki points and says, "She said her house is near that smokestack." It's on the same island of Shodoshima, but far from where they are standing.

Tanko asks, "Nikuta, how long does it take to get there?"

"It's not far. The bus hardly had time to honk and we were there. I didn't even have time to eat a bun."

"I want to go see Miss Pebble," says Mat-chan sadly.

"Let's go!"

"Yes, let's!"

"We'll run all the way there and back!" Mat-chan proposes.

Sonki adds, "Let's sneak away after lunch."

"We'll meet by the grove."

"Good idea!"

"Let's go!"