

## Twenty-Four Eyes, Part IV

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

The children are walking to Miss Oishi's house. The boys are in the lead, running down a narrow road between dense rows of trees. Behind them, the girls hold hands. They all look so happy, so full of energy!

Chattering, they scamper down a hill and walk along the road.

"Miss Pebble will be surprised."

"Do you think her leg still hurts?"

By now the villagers have noticed that their children are missing. They look everywhere, in quick scenes that show us the people, the architecture, and the implements of labor. The cinematographer frames images of simple beauty: a pile of rocks by the sea, two women standing against a background of sloping roofs, an abstract composition of a ship's rigging; two men talking against a background of nets; two women talking, framed by tree branches; a small group of villagers leaning in close as they talk, in front of a luminous white wall.

We hear the conversations:

"Have you seen our Kotoe?"

"I don't see my Sanae anywhere either."

"Have you seen Sanae around?"

"I haven't seen our Matsue either."

"I can't believe Fujiko's gone too. Where would she go?"

"How strange for all of them to disappear."

"Where did they go?"

"The first-graders are all gone!"

In an extreme long shot, the children are walking at the foot of a mountain, so tiny that we can barely make them out. We hear quiet harp music as they cross a bridge, above which loom the dark craggy profile of a mountain and a tall white puff of clouds. They pass some warehouses and a simple farm wagon.

They must have walked a great distance: Sanae's zori sandal has broken.

"Here, wear this," says Sonki, giving her his own. He walks on, barefoot.

Walking across a mountain path, they pass a white goat. Several children stop to pet it. Trudging, they show their tiredness.

Kotoe is the first to start crying. "Come on," Takeichi says, taking her hand.

But soon many more are wailing: they are tired and hungry. As they walk, rubbing their eyes, we hear again the sad song of abandonment that they sang with Miss Oishi.

*Mother Crow,  
Why do you cry?  
Because I left*

*My seven precious babies  
Back on the mountain  
They're precious, so precious*

A dissolve signals that even more time has passed. The children are back on the main road. A small bus appears behind them. When the driver toots his horn, the children run out of the way.

But suddenly they cry out, "It's Miss Pebble!" "Miss Pebble!" They start to run. Sure enough, Miss Oishi sticks her head out of the bus window, looking back at them.

The vehicle comes to a stop, and the children, energy renewed, run toward it. The driver gets out, followed by Miss Oishi, leaning on her crutches. Curious passengers lean out the windows to watch.

"What's going on?" asks Miss Oishi.

Nikuta explains, through tears, "We wanted to see you." By now, Miss Oishi herself is crying. Sanae says, "We didn't tell anyone we were coming."

"Well, you'd better all get on the bus," says the teacher. "Go on!"

Miss Oishi has taken the children to her house. She sits inside with some of them, looking out at the sunny day.

The structure of the sliding door divides the image into three sections. The outer sections have matching latticework on the sides. In the center, Miss Oishi's mother is serving drinks and noodles to the children. Behind her, the outline of bare tree limbs. She says, "I made a lot, so eat all you want." Miss Oishi comments, "It's good my doctor's visit ended early or I'd have missed you." "That's right!" someone agrees.

On the sandy shore, Miss Oishi stands on crutches with her twelve little pupils, posing for a photograph. The water of the inland sea ripples behind them.

With a dark cloth over his head, the photographer leans down to his camera, which sits on a tripod. "Here we go!" he says. "Look at the flower!" But then he runs over to adjust one of the children. Finally satisfied, he holds up the flower again and says, "Here we go. Ready?"

*Click!* "All done."

The children seem solemn, their exuberance suppressed by the photographer's attention.

Miss Oishi has arranged for a ferry to take the children home. In a long shot, we see her waving at them as the ferry pulls out. Both the boat and the teacher seem tiny. The shimmering sea and the majestic mountains: the children's lives unfold surrounded by nature and they seem a part of it in this shot.

"Hisako, is your head off in the clouds?" Miss Oishi's mother scolds her. "Thank the principal."

They are at home. Once again, the doorway divides the image into three sections, with the spidery tree limbs outside.

Miss Oishi asks, "Has it been decided who'll take my place?"

"Yes, we decided at our staff meeting. Is something wrong?"

“No, I'm just... in a bit of a fix.”

“What kind of fix?”

“I promised the children I'd return to school.”

“Now that's a surprise! Can you get there by yourself?” We see the white bandage on her foot. “Your mother says you can't ride your bicycle.”

“Hisako!” her mother scolds her. “The principal has been very kind.” She softens her tone and turns to the principal. “If you transfer her to the main school, in just ten days, she can start taking the bus. Your help would be greatly appreciated.” She finishes with a low bow and he responds with a nod.

Cheerfully the principal informs Miss Oishi, “Your replacement is to be Mrs. Goto. She was very happy to accept. Things worked out quite well.”

“Isn't that nice?” prods her mother.

A man appears in the doorway, a box balanced on his shoulder. It's the porter from the opening of the film – the ding-a-ling man. “Pardon me.”

“What's all this?” asks Miss Oishi's mother.

He puts down the box, takes off his hat and bows. “Thanks for giving the children something to eat the other day,” he says to Miss Oishi.

“It was nothing,” answers Miss Oishi. “I was very happy to have visitors.”

“Their parents sent along a few things: a quart of rice, two quarts of beans.” One by one, he takes out the items and sets them on the floor. “These are dried sardines. Two more quarts of rice and a quart of beans.”

With a dissolve, we are back at the village. The children go running up the hill, seemingly right into the low clouds.

At the top, they stop, with a billow of clouds above them. Far below, they see a boat approaching. We hear the wistful song “Annie Laurie.”

Sonki is the first to realize that it's their beloved teacher. Kit-chin jumps for joy. The children take off towards the schoolyard to tell the others. They run past the stone Buddhas where Miss Oishi was injured, yelling:

“It's Miss Pebble!”

“Miss Pebble's coming!”

“Miss Pebble!”

Once again, we see the elegant shot of the schoolyard, the gridded wall guiding the eye to the sea. The children burst in, still yelling. At the news, the youngsters crouching by the schoolhouse jump up and run to the shore, soon followed by the older pupils. The senior teacher emerges from the schoolhouse into the deserted yard and gazes forlornly after them.

In a long moment of calm, the boat reaches the shore, and the ferryman lifts up Miss Oishi, with her crutches, and places her on land. Then the children run to see her, shrieking with happiness, passing the gravestones of a cemetery on their way.

They crowd tightly around her, clinging to her kimono, holding her hand.

“Does your leg still hurt?” asks Nikuta.

“Can you ride your bike yet?” asks Mat-chan.

“It may be another six months,” answers Miss Oishi.

“So you'll come by boat?” asks Takeichi.

The teacher shakes her head.

“So you'll walk all the way?” asks Kotoe hopefully.

“Let's go to the school,” suggests Miss Oishi.

A voice comes from off-screen: “Teacher!” It is one of the parents. Miss Oishi walks over to him and they bow in greeting.

“How's your leg? We've been worried.”

“Thank you. I'm very grateful for the rice you sent.”

Rather than going straight to the school, Miss Oishi takes the children on a tour of the village, visiting the parents who sent her gifts.

Finally, she comes to Nikuta's mother, who's standing in front of her store. We've seen her before: after the storm, wearing a white headscarf, she had scolded Miss Oishi for her laughter. The mother, ashamed of her previous behavior, bows deeply; Miss Oishi politely returns the deep bow.

“Thank you for the wonderful presents,” says Miss Oishi.

“Oh, it was nothing.” Prompted by Nikuta, who purses his lips looking at her, the woman continues,

“Forgive my bad habit of always meddling.” And she finishes with another bow, which Miss Oishi returns.

“Not at all.”

When they arrive at the school, the children gather around their teacher. “You know,” she says. “I can't ride my bicycle for quite a while, and the school is so far away. Limping along on my crutches, it would be night before I got here. That's why I can't...”

Takechi proposes, “If you take the boat, we'll come meet you every day.”

“Really? And see me off every evening?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. I wish I'd known that sooner. I'm afraid it's too late. I've been transferred to the main school. I'll be waiting for you there when you're older.”

In their boldly patterned kimonos, the children are bunched tightly together around her. As harp music plays, she says, “I just came to say farewell. Another teacher will be coming soon. Study hard. I love this little village, but with my leg like this, it's impossible.”

The children begin to wail.

“Teacher, we're sorry!”

With her hand over her eyes, Miss Oishi herself begins to cry. “It's all right. All children play pranks. It was just my bad luck.”

The senior teacher approaches the group. "What's this? She came all this way just to see you. You should be laughing instead of bawling."

He asks, "Are you better now, Miss Oishi?"

She takes a handkerchief from her kimono and dries her eyes. "Yes, thank you."

As the sobbing continues, the senior teacher complains, "There's no figuring out women and children. If you want to cry, go ahead! Cry all you want!" Hands on hips, he finally gives up. "So much for teaching my lesson!" he says in frustration and stalks off.

At the ferry, parents and children are gathered to bid Miss Oishi farewell. The grownups exchange deep bows.

The teacher gets in the boat, and they wave goodbye.

The ferry moves out over the placid sea as the children call out:

"Teacher!"

"Come back to see us!"

"Come back when your leg gets better!"

"You promised!"

"Good-bye, Teacher!"