

Twenty-Four Eyes, Part IX

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

Miss Oishi enters the principal's office. "What is it?" she asks him.
He rushes to slide the door closed. "Please sit down."

He takes his place at the desk and she sits down in the chair that he has placed for her.
Leaning towards her, he announces, "People are saying you're a Red!" He's quite agitated.
"What?"

"You must be more careful!" he exclaims.

"I'm afraid I don't understand. What do people say I did?"

"I warned you about this before. There are things a teacher must not discuss with her pupils."

He keeps leaning forward, poking his pipe at her. At the rear of the image, the square panels hold the two figures in place, connected, yet separated.

"I can't think what I might have said. I didn't tell them anything that was wrong."

"That's where the danger lies. You're young. You blurt out everything that enters your head. You can't do that

these days! Watch your words or you'll get in trouble!"

"Watch what words?"

"There's been tension on the Soviet border. We have air-raid drills even on this island! The whole country is banging the war drums, while you keep saying it's silly to become a soldier!"

"I just don't want my students killed."

We see Miss Oishi's face in close-up as the principal continues castigating her from off-screen.

"It won't do!"

"But I just..."

"Just don't say anything. See nothing, hear nothing, say nothing!" Hearing his words, Miss Oishi looks down, dismayed, resistant.

"Our sole duty as teachers is to raise citizens to serve the nation."

The school is assembled outside for the graduation ceremony. The students sing:

*We look up to our teachers
So grateful for their kindness
The years on the playground
Have passed so quickly*

*We look back
On those precious days
But now we must part
And say good-bye*

*The friendship and kindness
Shown every day
Will stay with us
The rest of our lives*

*We'll fend for ourselves
Work hard
And make our names
But now we must part
And say good-bye*

*We'll never forget the years
We have spent here
But now we must part
And say good-bye*

After showing us the individual students and the solemn line of teachers, heads bowed, the camera settles on fruit trees that have burst into blossom. It's spring.

Miss Oishi sits up in bed, beautifully framed in the doorway. Just outside, the cherry tree is in full bloom. "Mother?"

"She went shopping," says her husband. "How do you feel?"

"Better. A little sleep did the trick."

"That school excursion wore you out."

"No, it's the baby."

"Hurry up and have it!"

"Don't be silly!"

"It'll make coming home that much more fun," he says.

She puts a kimono over her shoulders.

"I'm sure our baby will be adorable," her husband says. "But your work has probably made you sick of kids."

"The truth is... I'm fed up with teaching. School starts in two days. Maybe I should resign."

"Why?"

"I'd like to quit and start a candy shop. I've done my best for my students for six years, but the relationship between us isn't working. I'm not allowed to form a true bond with them except through the state-approved textbook. What hypocrisy! 'Loyalty' and 'patriotism' from dawn till dusk!"

She goes on, "My boys all want to become soldiers. It's awful!"

"It's the times," her husband responds. "Can you stop the war by running a candy shop?"

"I should have listened to my mother. 'Never marry a seaman.'"

"You begged me to marry you!"

She laughs, then gets serious. "What will happen if war breaks out?"

She answers her own question. "Our lives will be cut short. You'll be drafted onto a ship that could be sunk at any time. I could be widowed with a baby on the way." She suddenly turns to him. "Say! If I'm quitting, why don't you quit too? We could be farmers."

“No, thanks, but you quit if you like.”

“I will. I'm going to tell Mother.”

“Aren't you being a bit impulsive?”

“No!”

“Well, your mother's too old for surprises.”

Framed in the doorway, Miss Oishi's pensive profile is echoed by her husband's.

Sadly, she concludes, “I'm serious. I've had enough of teaching.”

From off-camera, her mother calls her, “Hisako! Some students are here.”

“Really?” She jumps up and goes outside, while her husband rolls up the futon.

“Welcome!” she says to her students. “Pardon my appearance. I was sleeping. I'm so glad you came.”

It's Takeichi, in his school uniform, and Kit-chin, in a kimono with *geta* on his feet. They approach and bow, saying in unison, “Good day!”

The sea is visible behind the boys: Miss Oishi, of course, lives on the island of Shodoshima.

“Come inside,” she says.

“We have to catch the next bus in 15 minutes,” says Takeichi.

“Really? Catch the one after that!”

“Then we wouldn't get back until dark,” explains Kit-chin.

“I see. Wait and I'll walk you to the stop.”

“Kit-chin, what's that hunting cap* for?” she asks, referring to something the boy is holding.

He explains, “I'm not going on to high school.”

“You're really quitting?”

“Thanks for all you've done.”

**‘Hunting caps’ were actually worn by merchants at the time.*

“Take care,” Kit-chin says and the boys bow.

“Wait,” she laughs. “I'm coming with you. What will you do now?”

“I leave tomorrow for an apprenticeship in Osaka. My employer will send me to night school.”

“It's all decided? What kind of work?”

“A pawnshop.”

“You'll be a pawnbroker?”

“No, just a clerk. I'll work until I'm drafted.”

“Hmm... Well, be a good clerk, and write to me.” She walks up to him and puts his cap on his head, where it seems huge: an adult's hat that he hasn't grown into yet.

She asks his friend, “Takeichi, when does school start?”

“In two days.”

“Really?” She puts his cap on him.

She steps back and observes them, as the camera pans the boys from toe to head. They look at each other and smile broadly. The arc of a blossoming cherry branch behind Takeichi's head creates another lovely composition.

They exchange smiles with their beloved teacher. From off-screen, her mother calls, "Hisako!"

"Are you really quitting teaching?"

"Yes. I'll tell you about it later."

"You're quitting teaching?" one of the kids asks.

"That's right. It won't be any fun without you two there!"

Miss Oishi walks the students to the bus, one hand on each shoulder, against a beautifully layered backdrop of tall wildflowers in bloom and the scooping curve of the mountain.

"Be sure to come visit on your holidays! I want to see you all grown up. You were my first students, and my last. Now we'll be good friends."

"*Hai!*" agrees Kit-chin.

"You too, Takeichi!" she says.

"*Hai!*"

Kit-chin reports, "Fujiko and her family moved to Hyogo yesterday." The family has told their neighbors that they're moving to the prefecture of Hyogo, without naming a particular city. So their exact destination remains mysterious, suggesting a doomed future for Fujiko's family.

Yesterday?" Miss Oishi is surprised.

"Five people and their stuff in the ding-a-ling man's boat. All they had were futons and pots."

"Her parents never did any heavy labor," adds Takeichi. "Everybody's afraid they'll become beggars." The teacher says, "I feel so bad for Fujiko."

We hear a violin play "Auld Lang Syne" as the bus pulls up and the conductor steps out to greet the new passengers and take their tickets. The boys take off their hats and say goodbye to their teacher with deep bows. "Thank you for everything," says Kit-chin. "Take care of yourself."

"Be well," she replies.

"*Sayonara,*" says Takeichi.

"*Sayonara,* and take care," she says, bowing her head.

Miss Oishi watches the boys board the bus. As it pulls away, she runs a few steps toward it in her *geta*.

She waves and the boys wave back, hats in hand, stretching their arms far out of the bus windows.

She runs to the crest of the hill, the wide open sky behind her. She stands waving, the fabric of her kimono tousled by the breeze, until the bus is out of sight. As the last notes of "Auld Lang Syne" sound, she lowers her arm finally, and the screen fades to black.