

## Twenty-Four Eyes, Part VI

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

At Mat-chan's house, her father and Miss Oishi sit on the floor, at either side of the doorway. Miss Oishi wipes away her tears with a handkerchief. In the front left corner of the frame, Mat-chan cradles the baby.

The inside of the house is dark. But in the doorway we see a few bright white bantam chickens, as if they were under a spotlight. This impoverished family depends on the eggs from these chickens to eat. In the background, we hear a guitar quietly playing the Christian hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Mat-chan's father says, "You're very kind, but unless the baby dies, I can't let Mat-chan go to school. I know it's hard on her... but now that I'm a widower, I don't know what else to do."

Unfolding her carry cloth, Miss Oishi sets a shiny object on the floor. "Mat-chan, this lunch box has a lily on the lid. Use it when you come back to school." Mat-chan shifts her weight as the baby reaches up to pull at her hair. She turns her back on the teacher, her father and those chickens outside. "Help your father here at home," Miss Oishi continues.

"I'll be thinking of you at school," she says, through tears. "You're such an admirable girl."

"She kept asking for that lunch box," says her father. "Thank you." He bows and Miss Oishi returns the gesture. "In any case," he goes on, "the baby was premature. Without her mother's breast, she hasn't much chance of surviving. She'll be better off that way. In a home as poor as this... what happiness could she hope for?"

Mat-chan's father lowers his face into his hand, as Miss Oishi sobs again. Disappointed that she won't be returning to school, Mat-chan accepts that the baby is her responsibility. She continues to tenderly pat her baby sister, comforting it, as her teacher and father talk.

A closeup shows us the new lily lunch box, which now she may never use.

After a dissolve, we see students walking to school under pouring rain. A small bus approaches and stops.

Miss Oishi gets out, and is greeted from afar by a small group of girls: "Teacher! Teacher!"\* She turns and waits for them, in another simple and lovely composition: the strong verticals of the telephone poles, the wires slanting down towards the ground. In the background, the ragged profile of the mountains and the hovering mist create rough bands of dark and light.

*\*Miss Oishi now teaches upper grades and so is referred to as 'insegnante.' However, there is just one word for teacher in Japanese: sensei. In keeping with the spirit of the story, the children continue to call her 'maestra' in the photo-story.*

The girls have wrapped their kimonos high above their knees to keep them dry. The raised *geta* keep their feet out of the mud.

Kotoe says, "Mat-chan's baby sister died."

"Oh, no!" gasps Miss Oishi.

“My grandma went to offer condolences, and Mat-chan's dad was drunk. He kept crying, ‘It's better this way.’”

“The poor baby.”

In the unrelenting rain, the teacher leads the students to the school.

Miss Oishi arrives at school. She puts her umbrella and other things away. She hesitates a moment at the doorway before entering.

She comes in, puts her things down on the desk and greets her fellow teachers. Something is amiss. The teachers are talking quietly in small groups, with troubled expressions.

Walking to the front of the room, Miss Oishi touches her friend's back to get her attention. “What is it?” she asks.

“They arrested Mr. Kataoka.”

“What?!”

“The police are still here.”

“What did he do?”

“They say he's a Red.”

“Mr. Kataoka a Red? How could that be?”

In the doorway, the principal appears, wearing spectacles, in suit, vest and tie: “He'll be released soon for lack of evidence. It's most unpleasant.”

“How did this happen?” someone asks.

“A teacher friend of his in Onomichi was filling his own students' heads with antiwar ideas. He and his pupils printed an anthology, *Seeds of Grass*. The police thought Kataoka had a copy.”

Miss Oishi speaks up. “I've seen that pamphlet. It didn't seem Red to me.”

“Say that and they'll think you're a Red too!” admonishes the principal. Four faces look at her with disapproval.

“What on earth for? I thought it was well-written. I read some of the stories to my class. ‘Barley Harvest,’ ‘Soy Merchant's Chimney’ and so on. They were good.”

“That's dangerous material! Where did you get it?”

“A copy was sent here.”

“Where is it now?”

“In my classroom.”

“For heaven's sake!” the principal exclaims and rushes to the door. “Quick, show me where it is!” Miss Oishi goes with him. At the sound of the bell, the teachers gather up their materials to go teach. One comments, “That was a scare. We teachers have to be patriotic.”

As Miss Oishi stands by, the principal rips each page from *Seeds of Grass*, written by the children of Onomichi Middle School, and he puts it into a small fire on his desk.

“What a fright you gave me!” he says. “I think it took years off my life.”

Miss Oishi gazes at the burning book, perhaps reflecting on what it means for her country and for her teaching. “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” plays in the background, as if to comfort her.

The song continues into the next scene. In Miss Oishi's classroom, while the children raise their hands and participate in class, we see a close-up of an empty wooden chair at a desk. In voice-over, we hear Miss Oishi reading a letter she has written:

*Dear Mat-chan,*

*I was so sad to hear about your baby sister, but these things happen in life. Never stop loving her in your heart. Please try to feel better.*

*When will you come back to school? I look at your empty desk every day and think of you.*

Now we hear the voices in the classroom. Miss Oishi asks, "Who gets a newspaper at home?" Every hand shoots up, with a chorus of "Hai!"

"And who reads it?" A few hands are raised. "Just three of you? Who knows what a Red is?" The children look at each other, unsure. "No one, of course."

"How about a capitalist?"

One student raises her hand. "It's a rich person."

"Hmmm... That'll do for now. And what's a worker?"

Miss Oishi has been called to the principal's office. He reprimands the young teacher as he walks back and forth in front of the window, the white curtains stirring in the breeze. The room is a study of vertical lines and right angles – the books, the window frame, the pattern on her kimono. Outside, within the grid of window panes, the summer sun shines on the curved roof tiles.

"Your late father was my friend. That's why I'm worried. Can you imagine your mother's grief if you got into trouble?"

"The students know all about *Seeds of Grass* and Mr. Kataoka," she answers. "They asked why he was arrested."

"Then you simply say you don't know," he instructs her, as he wipes his glasses. "You have to be careful what you say these days. Proletariat, capitalists... you don't discuss such things with your students!"

She has been looking down the whole time, but now her head falls even farther. "I'll be more careful," she promises.

"Please do that. Being too outspoken can only hurt you." He puts his glasses back on, ending the meeting.

In a careful composition, framed once more by the leafy tips of branches, we watch Miss Oishi from high above as she walks the length of the school building, with "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" playing in the background. The bottom half of the shot is the still and empty space of the school yard. Beyond that, the school building, like the primary school, is dense with geometric patterns: the tiles on the sloping roof, the horizontal planks of the walls, and the rectangular panes of glass, lit from within.

"Teacher!" Miss Oishi turns around. It's Kotoe, in her kimono and zori sandals, holding her books in a carry cloth. "It's about Mat-chan."

"Did you give her my letter?"

“I took it to her house. A strange woman was there. She took Mat-chan to Osaka on the night ferry.”  
Miss Oishi gasps. “She's being adopted by relatives. Mat-chan cried and said she wouldn't go and held on to the beams of the house.”

“Her father was calm and gentle at first, but then he started slapping and punching her. Nobody could stop him. Finally she agreed to go. Everybody was crying. I cried, too, as I went to see her off, but Mat-chan didn't say a word.”

Miss Oishi takes her handkerchief out of her kimono and holds it to her eyes, weeping.

She walks slowly away until she turns behind the building, out of sight. The screen fades to black.