

Twenty-Four Eyes, Part VII

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

A caption tells us that it is now autumn: October.

The kids are on a school trip with Miss Oishi,* aboard a ferry. As always, their time together is filled with song, this one dedicated to Konpira, the Japanese god of seafarers.

*He flashes his golden staff
And clears the fog
from the mountains and seas
Once again now!
Konpira comes
from the shadows
of the mountain's fresh leaves*

The students are on their way to the shrine to Konpira, located in the town of Kotohira on Mount Zozu.

**In accordance with Japanese custom, Miss Oishi, as an only child, inherits her parents' house; her new husband has married into her family and takes her name. Note that the Japanese usage does not distinguish between 'Miss' and 'Mrs.' The students just call her sensei (teacher) or Miss Pebble anyhow. So we will continue to call her Miss Oishi in this photo-story. The way she is known in Japanese hasn't changed and we feel the same way about it.*

As they sing, their heads sway back and forth in time to the music.

*Keeps you safe in stormy weather
Lights the way with his lantern
Until you drop anchor*

Miss Oishi discreetly checks her wrist watch. She's wearing a beautiful silk kimono.

"I wish Fujiko and Sanae could have come," she comments.

"Mi-san too, though she's an only child," replies Ma-chan.

"That's why she couldn't come?"

"She might catch a cold."

"She said that?"

"But getting to see Konpira is a once-in-a-lifetime chance!" exclaims the teacher.

"I'm using my money from fishing," says Tanko.

"I sold eggs, and Sonki and I raided our bank accounts, right?" says Kit-chin.

"Yes!" nods Sonki.

Takeichi chimes in, "My folks said I had to use my own savings."

"Your parents are stingy," says Nikuta. "My dad bought me this uniform!" He jumps down from the bench to show it off.

"What's wrong with your shoes?" asks Tanko, pointing to Nikuta's feet. Nikuta lifts the hem of his pants to reveal his new white sneakers that are quite a bit too large for him. The kids all laugh. "Can you walk in those?" asks the teacher.

"Fujiko's family is deep in debt, so she couldn't come," Mi-San reports. "Their big house is about to be repossessed."

Miss Oishi reproaches her: "You shouldn't talk about such things. You want to be a midwife, don't you? A good midwife doesn't gossip."

"Let's sing some more!" she proposes.

Tanko says, "Let Ma-chan sing."

Miss Oishi agrees. "Ma-chan, you're the best singer in school."

The kids clap their hands in approval.

Taking a place at the side of the boat, Ma-chan begins to sing. We see the foamy wake that the boat carves in the water.

Walking along the beach

In the morning light

I'm reminded

Of people from times past

Something has caught Miss Oishi's eye. She gazes out over the side of the boat with a big smile on her face.

"There's the tourist boat!" cries Nikuta. Everyone runs to the side to look. The tourist boat glides along, in the vicinity of a few smaller boats.

In long shot, the image is divided into the familiar three bands: the tranquil sea; a thin strip of mountains; and the vast sky, with a few hazy clouds.

"There's her husband's ship!" exclaims Mi-san. The kids clap.

Teasing Mr. Oishi, the small band on the tourist boat plays "Home! Sweet Home!" He looks back at them and smiles.

The boats move swiftly toward each other, while the kids wave cheerfully.

In their excitement, some of the students run to the front of the ferry, still waving. Leaning over the rail, Miss Oishi's husband waves back.

The kids encourage Miss Oishi:

"Teacher, wave!"

“Aren't you going to wave?”

“There he is. I know that mug. Hey, Mr. Pebble!”

Finally, the boats cross paths, and Miss Oishi waves, her face lit by a smile.

The group is gathered in the ruins of Yashima Castle. Laughing and chattering, they throw small tiles off the ledge into the sea. These tiles – thin as rice crackers – are thrown for good luck and safety.

Miss Oishi doesn't have their energy. She sits and rests outside the tea house, with a teapot and cups at her side. She wipes her face with a handkerchief.

As we have come to expect in this film, each frame is beautifully composed.

At Ritsurin Park, in Takamatsu City, the children stand on an arched bridge, chattering and gaily throwing food down to the fish. Miss Oishi, apparently exhausted, sits and wipes her neck.

Noticing, Mrs. Tamura (Kimiyo Ôtsuka), another of the teachers on the trip, asks, “Do you feel ill?”

“No, I'm fine.”

Finally they arrive at Mount Zozu. With great vigor, the students climb the stairs to Konpira's shrine. Miss Oishi brings up the rear.

In high spirits, the children run to the edge of the observation deck. The teachers follow.

When Miss Oishi sits off to the side in the shade, Mrs. Tamura approaches her again. “You look pale.”

“I'm tired and feel chilled.”

“Some hot udon noodles would be nice.”

The woman checks her watch. “I'll go with you. We have time.”

As they walk along the bustling street in town, Mrs. Tamura notices a promising restaurant. “Udon in broth is good for a cold,” she comments.

“Let's try over there,” Miss Oishi replies, pointing.

As they walk towards the noodle shop, they hear a waitress call out, “One tempura!”

Miss Oishi stops for a moment, pensive, and then follows the voice to a different restaurant. She parts the hanging fibers of the doorway curtain and looks inside.

“Mat-chan!” she exclaims, with a startled look.

Mat-chan is dressed as a waitress, wearing make-up, with her hair tied back. She stands silently observing the teacher.

In the background, we hear the gentle strains of the song about Mother Crow leaving her precious babies.

Miss Oishi and Mat-chan walk out onto the street. From inside, we watch through the hanging curtain as Mat-chan bows politely.

“So you weren't in Osaka? You've been here the whole time?” Miss Oishi asks, in disbelief.

Mat-chan responds with the slightest nod.

Mat-chan's employer (Chieko Naniwa) steps outside. "May I ask who you are? I can't have her going outside."

Mat-chan explains, "This was my teacher. She was very kind to me."

Miss Oishi introduces herself, with a polite bow.

"Well, well! So kind of you to come. Please come in." Then the owner instructs Mat-chan: "Get them some tea."

Miss Oishi invites Mrs. Tamura to join her.

Shyly, Mat-chan serves the teachers tea.

Miss Oishi says, "I've been wondering what happened to you. But I'm glad you seem well. You seem to be working hard."

The owner approaches and says, "Yes, she's a big help. There's so much to do in a restaurant." She brusquely sends Mat-chan to take care of some customers and chats for a moment with the teachers, swatting at flies as she talks.

It turns out that the restaurant doesn't have noodles and the teachers decide to leave.

Miss Oishi looks over at her former pupil, who timidly returns her gaze, then looks down.

Returning, the owner sets a tea kettle down. "Are you catching the next ferry? It'll be leaving soon."

"*Hai*," answers Miss Oishi quietly. Then she turns to her companion. "Shall we go?"

"Aren't you going to talk to her?" her colleague replies.

"She's quite busy," explains the owner.

"Sorry to have inconvenienced you," says Miss Oishi. She and Mrs. Tamura get up and bow as Mat-chan stares at the floor in misery.

"Please forgive our poor hospitality," replies the owner, with an even deeper bow.

Miss Oishi turns to her former pupil. "Mat-chan... take care. Write to me, and I'll write too."

As Mat-chan stands, her head bent onto her chest, Miss Oishi says, "*Sayonara*."

When the two women have left, Mat-chan runs out the back way and into the alley, calling, "Teacher!"

But at that moment her former classmates come running by, and she hides from them.

Just outside the alley, the students stand for a happy moment in a group around their teacher, holding hands. One asks, "Teacher, where did you go?"

When they've passed, Mat-chan steps out and follows them with her gaze. She wipes tears from her face.

After a dissolve, we see her at the waterside, watching her old friends ride the ferry home. We hear their joyful voices as they sing:

Mother Crow, why do you cry?

Because I left

My seven precious babies

Back on the mountain

Mat-chan walks beside the sea wall, her face in her hands, weeping.

She passes workmen pulling their carts: the life of the island continues. But she can't go on. She bends forward as if in pain and wails uncontrollably for the childhood she's lost. The screen fades to black.