

## Twenty-Four Eyes, Part VIII

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

Miss Oishi is back in the classroom. According to the assignment on the blackboard, her students are writing about their hopes for the future. Now that she doesn't have to ride her bike to school, Miss Oishi is wearing a kimono. With her head leaning on her hand, she draws flowers in her notepad.

We hear again the melancholy tune "Annie Laurie" that opened the film. Miss Oishi looks up and gazes sadly at Mat-chan's empty desk. Under the flower drawing, she writes out the girl's full name: Matsue Kawamoto.

As Miss Oishi looks around the classroom, she meets eyes with Ma-chan, in her sailor suit. They smile at each other. Then the student resumes her writing:

*Since I'm an only child, my mother wants to send me to a prefectural high school.\* But even looking at numbers makes my head hurt. I want to go to sewing school, where there are no exams.*

*\*A prefectural girls' high school was a prestigious school, which admitted only the brightest girls. Graduates moved on to college. At the time this film was made, very few girls went on to high school.*

The camera moves on to Sanae, who writes:

*From now on... if women don't have jobs, they'll have a hard life like my mother. That's why my older sister is working as a nurse at the Red Cross. I want my sister to send me to a teacher's college so that I can become...*

She stops, erases something, and then writes a formal word for 'teacher.'

Sanae turns to the girl beside her, who is staring helplessly at her paper. "Fujiko, why aren't you writing anything?" Fujiko puts her face down on the desk and starts to sob. "What's wrong?" Miss Oishi looks up. "What is it, Fujiko?" she asks.

Miss Oishi goes out of the classroom with Fujiko. On the veranda, with the teacher's hand on her shoulder, comforting her, Fujiko says, "I have no hopes for the future. What can I write?" "You don't have to write then. I know how hard things have been." "I really wanted to go on the school trip. I don't even know how much longer we can stay in our house. It's someone else's now."

She collapses in tears and Miss Oishi embraces her. "It's all right. Don't say anymore... I don't know what to say, but these hardships aren't your fault, or your parents' fault either. These things happen for a lot of reasons." Fujiko dries her tears with her hand. "So don't lose heart. Just keep your spirits up." Stroking the girl's hair, the teacher adds, "If you ever feel like crying, come to my house. We'll have a good cry together." At this, Miss Oishi herself starts crying.

Miss Oishi and Kotoe sit in the empty classroom. The image is an exquisite study in light and shade, made up of the radiance behind the curtains and the diagonal array of desk tops. The teacher asks, "So you're really dropping out?" Kotoe nods, head bowed. "But you like school, don't you? Why not stay at least another year? You're a good student. I'd hate to see you go. Shall I speak to your family?"

“It's too late. I already promised.”

“Promised what?”

“I promised my mother I'd quit school if I could go on the school trip.”

“That's too bad. So there's nothing I can do?”

“My sister will be starting fifth grade. If I stay in school, who'll cook at home?”

“Your mother goes out to fish every day?”

“Almost every day.”

“That's why you wrote one day you wished you were a boy for your mother's sake.”

“Yes, I feel sorry for her.”

Kotoe smiles. “But at least when my sister finishes sixth grade, I'll get to work for a dressmaker. And when I'm eighteen, I'll be a maid in Osaka. I'll spend all my money on clothes, like my mother did.”

“And then you'll get married?” Miss Oishi asks, joylessly. “Yes, you'll get married... just like your mother.”

They sit quietly, listening to the pouring rain. Once again, we hear “Annie Laurie,” the film's motif for the grief of childhood lost.

Miss Oishi sits on a big rock formation with the boys. Skipping stones into the sea, Tanko announces, “I'm going to high school. After I graduate, I'll fish until I'm drafted. Teacher, I can become a sergeant major, right?”

“You want to be an NCO?”

“They get a monthly salary.”

“I'll go to college and become a second lieutenant,” says Kit-chin. Like Tanko, he's wearing his school uniform: dark jacket, long pants, and cap.

“Stop bragging!” says Nikuta. “I'd go to high school if there weren't entrance exams.”

In kimonos, Sonki and Takeichi look up at him.

Miss Oishi asks sadly, “Why do you want to become soldiers?”

Tossing a stone back and forth between his hands, Tanko explains, “I won't inherit anything. It beats being a poor fisherman.”

Kit-chin's situation is different: “I'll inherit the rice shop, but I'd rather be a soldier.”

“Really?” replies Miss Oishi. “You'd better think it over.”

“Are you against soldiers?” asks Tonko.

She shakes her head. “No, but I prefer fishermen and rice merchants.”

“So you're a coward,” he replies. The scene is full of air and light, the vast sky behind them.

“That's right,” she says. “I'm a coward.”

Miss Oishi is walking with Ma-chan, who wears a sailor suit, her hair in braids. The girl runs through the open gate to her house, calling, “Mother, I brought the teacher!”

In the house, with a teapot at hand, they sit on the floor, which is covered with rectangular straw mats. The three figures are outlined against the multiple grids of the walls and windows. This light, orderly room is a stark contrast to the cramped and crowded house where Ma-chan lived with her father.

With great animation, waving her hands and leaning forward and back, Ma-chan's mother complains, “She won't listen to a thing I say. I know she has a good voice, but lots of girls in Japan have good voices. The *shamisen*\* is more fitting for a restaurant owner's daughter.”

For her part, Miss Oishi sits quietly, with a downward gaze.

\**The shamisen is a stringed instrument.*

“She insists on attending a conservatory in Tokyo, so she wants to go to high school. Her father's absolutely furious. Please talk some sense into her. She sulks all day and won't eat a thing. Ma-chan, listen to what your teacher says.”  
But Miss Oishi doesn't say a word.

So the mother continues, “Tell her if she goes to the conservatory, she'll be no help to her family at all!”

In a medium shot, Ma-chan looks up at the adults, then lowers her gaze again. In the background, framed by the window panes, we glimpse the tranquil ripples on the sea.

Finally, Miss Oishi replies. “It's not my place to interfere. I understand how you and your husband feel, but I know how Ma-chan feels too.”

“No!” Ma-chan's mother protests, gesturing for emphasis. “She's talking nonsense, grasping at rainbows!” she says referring to her daughter.

Looking at the girl, Miss Oishi says, “Ma-chan, your happiness means everything to me. I feel so bad that I can't say more now... But you know, all the boys want to become soldiers. I'm worried sick about losing even a single one. I'm happy I don't have to worry about that with you girls.” She concludes, wistfully, “I'd like to help you realize your ambitions, but there's nothing else I can say for now. There's really nothing more I can say...” Outside the window, we notice a young tree, shaking slightly in the wind.