

Twenty-Four Eyes, Part XII

Keisuke Kinoshita, Director (1954)

A sequence of four beautiful compositions moves the story on: the big County Assembly Hall arch – with the inscription “Victory at War!”; a pier with the caption – August 15, 1945 – which is the date of the Japanese surrender to the Allies; an abandoned fisherman’s basket sits on a beach as waves roll to shore, perhaps the fisherman left it to hear the important radio announcement by the Emperor that day; an old man wearing a wide-brimmed hat who walks with his stick on a long straight road. Perhaps he’s the fisherman, on his way to hear the important radio announcement by the Emperor...

Outside the school, an officer on a raised platform announces to the silent rows of children, “We’ve called you here on short notice to hear the voice of His Gracious Majesty the Emperor broadcast on the radio as he addresses the entire nation. Listen attentively and with reverence.”

By now, atomic bombs have been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Emperor is about to report Japan’s surrender. This news will have repercussions in every Japanese household.

A dissolve takes us to the home of Miss Oishi, who has lost both her mother and her husband.

Daikichi sits alone at the small round table. His little brother serves him a bowl of noodles. His sister brings another bowl and sits on the floor by the table. Their mother joins them.

Miss Oishi says, “Daikichi, don’t be so glum. Now children can go to school like children again.” She picks up her bowl. “Let’s eat.”

“Mother, we lost the war. Didn’t you hear on the radio?” He looks down grimly, without eating.

“I did. But it’s good that the war is over. Nobody else will be killed in battle. The survivors will return.”

He complains, “We couldn’t die for our country.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

“Are you glad?”

“Stop talking nonsense,” she says. “Are you? Your father was killed. He won’t be coming back.”

“Aren’t you going to cry because we lost?”

“I cried all right. I cried for the dead.”

At that, Daikichi picks up his bowl and begins to eat.

A figure we can’t quite make out is running along a country road in serene daylight, carrying a small body in her arms. Trailed by a group of youngsters, she hurries into a building. It is Miss Oishi, holding her lifeless daughter, Yatsu, in her arms! “Please, help!” she cries desperately.

As she runs on, the camera waits with the children, who have come to a halt. We hear her shout from off-screen, “Please! Please!” As the children watch, she runs back through the shot.

Miss Oishi lays the little girl on a table and cries out, “Doctor!” When a nurse appears, Miss Oishi explains. “She fell out of a tree! Please help!” She turns to the little girl. “Yatsu!”

The doctor comes rushing through the village, followed by the child who went to fetch him. The extended horizontal lines in the shot – the rice paddy, the road, the low buildings – emphasize the

long duration of the journey. In the background, adult voices harmonize on the tune “Home Sweet Home.”

At last, the doctor reaches the building where Miss Oishi is waiting.

Inside, the group of children still stands and watches. In his white coat, the doctor walks out of the room where Yatsu lies. Shortly afterward, Miss Oishi’s two older children arrive.

They stand behind their mother, who is at the little girl’s side. When the nurse steps away, Miss Oishi turns, says weakly, “Daikichi...” and collapses onto the floor, moaning and wailing.

On a beautiful day, with a vast, clear sky, we see Miss Oishi walking with her two sons. At Yatsu’s grave, an open structure with a tiny roof, she kneels. The boys stand behind her, heads bowed, with clouds and sea at their backs.

As she pours water onto the flowers over the grave, Miss Oishi talks to her daughter, telling the story of her death. “You were so small, and so hungry,” she says. “No wonder you climbed that persimmon tree. You had to. You were starving. You didn’t do anything wrong.” Sobbing, she concludes, “Poor thing... still clutching that unripe persimmon.”

Captions tell us that it is one year after the war’s end. It’s April 4th: time for school to resume! In a scene matching the one near the beginning of the film, a boat glides over still water, as we hear a melancholy melody: “Annie Laurie.”

The shot is organized into four familiar bands: sea, rugged mountains, cloud, and sky.

Miss Oishi sits in the boat, with Daikichi at the oar.

He looks at the sky. “It’s finally clearing up.”

She turns to him, asking, “Is it your first time to the cape?”

“Yes, I never had any reason to come.”

“Of course not.”

“I never thought I’d be teaching in that schoolhouse again,” she goes on. “It’s been eighteen years. Almost two decades.”

Her son offers, “I can take you by boat in the rain, but not if it’s windy.”

“Don’t worry. If there’s a storm, I’ll walk.”

“That’ll tire you out,” he says protectively.

“Don’t be silly. I’ve still got some life in me. I have to raise you and Namiki to be fine young men.”

“You could use a bike,” he suggests.

“We can’t afford one. They’re so expensive,” she replies. “Are you tired?”

“I’m alright!” he assures her, smiling.

“You’re good at rowing,” she says. “Another child of the sea.”

“Anyone can row,” he says placidly. Leaning forward and back, he moves the oar in a slow rhythm.

“There was a child named Takeichi,” Miss Oishi recalls. “He was just a first-grader then, but he offered to row me home. That was long ago. He was killed in the war.”

“A pupil of yours?”

“Yes.” She reaches up and dries a tear from her eye.

A dissolve brings us to the old primary school by the sea. A hammer bangs on the wall to call the start of school, just as it had eighteen years before.

Miss Oishi stands at the front of the classroom, holding the attendance book. It’s the same room where she taught all those years ago.

She says, “When I call your name, answer ‘*Hai!*’ in a loud voice.” She begins to call the names: “Satoru Kawasaki.”

“*Hai!*” he yells, throwing his arm up in the air.

“Katsuhiko Yamamoto.”

“*Hai!*”

“What spirit! You all answer nice and clearly.”

“Makoto Katagiri.”

A very quiet “*Hai!*”

“Are you Kotoe's little sister?” The little girl gives a quick nod. “Kotoe died, didn't she?” She nods again.

Miss Oishi looks down sadly at her book and then, collecting herself, calls the next name: “Chisato Kawamoto.”

“*Hai!*” The girl is identical to one of Miss Oishi’s former pupils.

“Are you related to Matsue?”

“My mother's in Osaka. She sent me this uniform.”

“So, you're Matsue's daughter?”

Miss Oishi’s adult life has come full circle. Her students now are tied to those she taught so long ago, who call up fond memories shadowed by hardship, death and war.

Overcome with emotion, she puts her hand to her face to hold back the tears.