

***One Bird* by Kyoko Mori**

“Tell me the truth,” I insist while my mother keeps shoving sweaters into her suitcase.

Though she is kneeling on the floor just a few feet away, she won’t look up at me. Frowning, she pretends to examine the sleeve of her gray cashmere pullover, as if she had found a hole or a stain that demanded her attention. I sigh loudly and start pacing in front of her.

On the windowsill behind her, the late-afternoon sun is hitting the four plastic containers in which she had planted her spring seeds two weeks ago. The rectangular containers are large but shallow, holding just a finger of dirt around each seed.

Half the plants have sprouted, their heads bent down with the cracked seeds stuck on top like tiny helmets: pansies, spring chrysanthemums, impatiens. The lavenders and the petunias are taking their time, their slow-germinating seeds hidden in the soil. My mother has covered the containers with clear plastic and placed them on heating pads, with a spray bottle ready for their daily misting. As long as I can remember, she has coaxed seeds to grow in the middle of winter and has had the seedlings ready for her garden in early March. But not this year, or ever again. I know she is not coming back.

In late November, when Mother first mentioned spending the winter with her father in their old home in a small village north of Kyoto, I knew right away that something was wrong. The more she kept explaining her reasons, the more I knew that she wasn’t telling the truth. “Grandfather Kurihara has a difficult time managing alone,” she said. “I want to help him get through the winter. I’ll write to Grandmother Shimizu in Tokyo. She won’t mind staying with you and your father until I come back.” Grandfather Kurihara is old, and he has been alone since my grandmother’s death almost three years ago, but he is strong and healthy. My mother—or anyone’s mother—would not leave her own home to take care of her father unless he was sick. Besides, if Mother were leaving to help him, she would have left right away, back in November. Instead she has waited till now, the last week of January. Winter is already half gone.

Mother has put away the cashmere sweater and is now reaching for her wool skirt. I kneel down beside her. Without a word she stops what she is doing.

Putting my arms around her shoulders, I try to reason with her. “It’s easier for me if I know. You don’t have to pretend in order to spare my feelings. You didn’t have to start up the plants to fool me.” A whining tone creeps into my voice, so I pause and take a deep breath. At fifteen I am too old to cry or to speak in the sad, nasal voice of a child.

Slowly, my mother leans forward and hugs me. “I wish I could take you with me, Megumi,” she says into my hair, each word warm and distinct, her wish ending with my name. Megumi means “God’s blessing.”

“The day you were born was the happiest day of my life,” Mother has told me many times. “I knew that God had given me the most important blessing ever.” Thinking about that makes me miss the old times—the two of us drinking hot chocolate in the winter and looking at pictures in my album, laughing about what a fat little baby I used to be, wondering how I ended up big-boned and thin. My mother keeps holding me tight. I wish this afternoon would go no further. It’s four-thirty; the sun-light is bright and orange, the way it gets an hour before sunset. If I sit still and say nothing more, maybe the day will pass without anything happening. But on my way home from school, I promised myself that I would speak nothing but the truth on our last afternoon together. “I’ll be honest,” I said over and over as I walked past the bare branches of the cherry and maple trees planted along the sidewalk; when the leaves come out in March or April, they will be reminders of my promise. By then, Mother will be long gone, living with Grandfather in their quiet home far from here. How can she leave me if I really am the greatest blessing of her life? Was she lying to me even back then?

I drop my arms from around her shoulders and pull myself out of her embrace.

“It’s no use wishing,” I tell her. “I know you can’t take me. I’m not stupid.”

Without a word, she looks down at the floor.