

When the Sakura Blooms

By Shinjo Takame

There was once a man named Itsuki. Itsuki was a prosperous samurai lord, the only son of his father, inheriting his family's lands and property when his father passed into the next life. The lands was of considerable size, with a number of villages and farms where peasants worked the rice fields. Itsuki himself lived on the estate in the mountains, a modest castle with expansive grounds and gardens where he had servants to attend the needs of himself and his widowed mother.

The first year after his father died, Itsuki toured his lands, seeing the conditions of the land and speaking to the headmen of the villages to see what improvements could be made.

When he returned to his estate, his mother went to speak with him

"It is time that you were married, my son," said his mother. "You should visit my sister in Kyoto, she can introduce you to the eligible noblewomen and advise you which one would make a most suitable wife."

And so Itsuki left for Kyoto, leaving the lands and estate in the charge of a trusted servant. His aunt wasted no time in introducing him to many eligible young ladies, seeing that Itsuki got invitations to tea tastings, poetry readings and banquets.

Itsuki felt a little bit lost in the social whirl of Kyoto. The young ladies he was introduced to were beautiful and sophisticated, they talked of city life. Itsuki longed for the peace of his mountain estate, the sounds of the fresh winds through the pines.

One evening, Itsuki's aunt hosted a Hanami, a feast beneath the sakura trees on her estate. Poems were composed and shared, music was played, sake and cakes were consumed beneath the sakura blossoms in the warm spring twilight.

Itsuki caught sight of a young woman sitting slightly apart from a group beneath a tree. She wore garments of a pale blue. He asked his aunt for her name.

"Her name is Haruko," his aunt said. "She is Lord Akechi's youngest daughter. She is rather shy and her older sisters are far better prospects for you."

Itsuki considered this, trying to catch her eye. But her glance was distant, seeming to look past the crowd and contemplating her own thoughts. He got up and went towards her, sitting between her and the group nearby.

"I hope I am not disturbing you, Lady Haruko," Itsuki said. "I can move if you wish."

Haruko shook her head noncommittally, looking down. "You may do as you please," she said softly. "I care not much for these large gatherings, I am only here because I am expected to be."

"As am I," said Itsuki. "This is but my first season here, and all I can think of the mountains."

"That is your home?" Haruko asked.

Itsuki nodded.

"Tell me about your home," she said.

He told of the frosts that would linger on the ground in the early spring, the cool mists that would slowly descend from the mountains, the warm water springs that would bubble up from beneath the earth. He told her how it sounded when the wind moved through the trees, of the smell of pine, of maple leaves and wisteria. The shy deer peering through the trees, the silver of the fish between the rows of rice, the silent foxes that would slink through the grass.

Haruko looked up and for the first time they met eyes. "That sounds beautiful," she said. "I

would like to see it.”

They met a number of times that season in Kyoto and Itsuki found that he enjoyed Haruko's company and that she appeared to enjoy his. As the season began to wane, Itsuki approached her father to request Haruko's hand in marriage. Itsuki's mother came to Kyoto to witness the wedding, and the three returned home.

Itsuki and Haruko planned their life together, planned for a family and children. Yet children seemed to take their time in coming, so Haruko planned a garden, setting out a grove of sakura trees. They were but saplings and it would take them for them to flower, but Haruko said to Itsuki that she knew one day their children would play beneath their blossoms.

By the time the first flowers appeared on the sakura trees, the first child was born, a son.

The two walked around the garden, Haruko holding their child.

The trees were still but small and only had a few blossoms on them.

“Next year, they will be even more beautiful,” said Haruko.

The years went by, more children were born, spring would return and the sakura trees were bigger and had more blossoms. And every spring Haruko would say, “Next year, they will be even more beautiful.”

Then one winter, Haruko was ill and despite all efforts nothing could make her well. Itsuki sat beside her.

“Are the sakura blooming yet?” asked Haruko. She sounded weak and tired.

“Not yet, my wife,” said Itsuki. “When the spring comes you will see them yourself.”

“Next year,” she said, “they will be even more beautiful.”

She smiled at him for the last time.

It was a long lonely winter for Itsuki. He had to keep his grief to himself as he comforted his children from the loss of their mother. Winter turned to spring, the snow receded and new leaves appeared on the trees. And when the sakura tree bloomed, there was such a bounty of blossoms that there had not been before.

Itsuki's heart broke that Haruko was not there to see it. The children played beneath the blossoms, as Haruko had known they would. But Itsuki watched them alone.

As day turned towards evening, a chill came into the air. He could hear blossoms move but there was no wind. And then he saw her.

Haruko, walking beneath the sakura blossoms in the spring twilight, seeing the children play. She was pale, so pale that Itsuki could see through her. She more glided than walk. Then she looked up at Itsuki.

“Haruko.”

She smiled at him. “You promised I would be here.”

“I did,” said Itsuki. “This was what you wanted, what you knew would happen.”

“Yes,” said Haruko. “And next year, they will be even more beautiful.”