

This is what it felt like to be lonely:

1. Like everyone was looking at you. Sumiko felt this once in a while.
2. Like nobody was looking at you. Sumiko felt this once in a while.
3. Like you didn't care about anything at all. She felt this maybe once a week.
4. Like you were just about to cry over every little thing. She felt this about once daily.

But not today! Sumiko jumped off the school bus and ran behind her house. Her family was working; she saw their small forms surrounded by bursts of color in the flower fields. "Jiichan!" she shouted to her grandfather.

She waved an envelope at him. "I'm invited to a party!"

"Can't hear!"

"I'm invited to a party!"

Everybody was looking at her, but nobody seemed to understand what she was saying. Oh, forget it! She ran into the stable to look for her little brother Tak-Tak, but he wasn't there. Baba just looked at her expectantly. She patted the old nag's yellow nose and said, "I'm invited to a party." Baba didn't change expressions.

She hurried inside the house to change into her work clothes. That morning Sumiko and some other kids in her sixth grade class had received invitations to a birthday party this Saturday. One of the popular girls was holding a party and had decided at the last minute to invite everyone in the class. The invitation was embossed, and the lettering inside was gold. Sumiko had read the inside about a dozen times: "Marsha Melrose, 12372 La Mirada Terrace, Saturday, December 6, 1941." The invitation reminded Sumiko of the expensive Valentines her cousin Ichiro gave to girls he especially liked.

Sumiko changed clothes behind the blankets her aunt and uncle had strung across the bedroom. She shared the room with Takao, a.k.a. Tak-Tak. Auntie and Uncle had strung the blankets up three weeks earlier when Sumiko turned twelve. She felt guilty because she actually liked the blankets, even though Tak-Tak had cried over them. He was just five, and he followed her around day and night. She loved him like crazy. But she still liked the blankets.

Sumiko stuck the invitation into her shirt pocket so that she could look at it now and then while she worked. This was the first class party she'd ever been invited to.

Through a fluke Sumiko lived in a school district with few Japanese. She was the only Japanese girl in her class, whereas if she'd lived a few miles away several Japanese girls would have been in the same class. The white girls were nice enough to her during recess, but she had never been invited to play on weekends or sleep over at anyone's house or anything like that.

She didn't used to worry about it as much as she did lately. The way Jiichan told the story, Sumiko had been born cheerful, had become sad when her parents died almost six years ago, had started to get cheerful again, and now was just "starting to act like a female." He'd said that because she had asked for a mirror for her bureau so she could decide when it was time to stop wearing bangs and start curling her long hair. Instead of a mirror she'd gotten the blankets.

"Hurry!" Tak-Tak called out. "Or we won't have time to brush Baba."

She stepped around the blanket and saw that her brother had come in. "I'm invited to a party." She waved the invitation at him.

He looked at her blankly. He wore black glasses that stayed attached to his head with an elastic band Auntie had made. The lenses were so thick his eyes always looked big.

Clearly Tak-Tak didn't see the significance of her invitation. Finally he said, "We have to brush Baba. You promised me before you went to school."

He looked a little forlorn over the thought that she might have forgotten what she promised him. "Did you clean Baba's brush?" she asked.

He held up a clean horse brush. "I'll race you!"

She let Tak-Tak stay one step ahead of her as they ran outside to the stable. "You beat me!" she cried as they fell into some hay.

Sumiko smiled as Tak-Tak jumped up from the hay to brush the horse. Tak-Tak really loved Baba. Her nose dripped all the time, but that worked out fine because Tak-Tak liked gooey things. Sumiko sat up and looked out the stable door. Her cousins Bull and Ichiro were still tending the flowers, 19-year-old Bull wide and strong and 23-year-old Ichiro slender and lean, graceful even in his farm clothes. Uncle was working at the far end of the fields among the carnations, which he always liked to take care of himself. The carnations grew in a makeshift, open-field greenhouse, where they were protected from extremes of sun or wind. Uncle was cutting some for tomorrow's wholesale flower market. Ichiro and Bull were pulling weeds among the stock. Stock were considered kusabana - "weedflowers" - but they emanated an amazing clove-like fragrance and Sumiko loved them most of all the flowers they'd ever grown.

Ragged white cheesecloth rippled above parts of the fields. Last spring Sumiko and Auntie had sewn cheesecloth tarps for the men to hang over the fields to protect the flowers - except the stock, which didn't need protection.

Uncle dreamed of setting up a glass greenhouse someday and growing perfect carnations, but so far that was just talk. Only the wealthier Japanese farmers owned glass greenhouses. Uncle said you could control the elements better with a greenhouse. That way you could grow perfect flowers. Perfection was the Holy Grail to Uncle. Sumiko

thought that a lot of the flowers were perfect, but Uncle often looked critically at his carnations and said things like, "They would be perfect if we had a glass greenhouse." He never even considered whether the stock could reach perfection - after all, they were just weedflowers.

Most of the greenhouse growers came from families who'd moved to America before laws were passed preventing those born in Asia from becoming citizens. Uncle and Jiichan had both been born in Japan, and unlike people born in Europe, Africa, or South or Central America, those born in Asia were not allowed to become citizens, and those who weren't citizens were not allowed to own or lease land. Because Ichiro was born in the United States, the farm's lease was in her cousin's name instead of her Uncle's.

Sumiko turned her attention back to the stable. Tak-Tak had climbed a stool and was brushing Baba's mane. Tak-Tak loved Sumiko best of anything in the world. But Sumiko thought maybe he loved the horse second best.

Now, she saw Jiichan walk into the outhouse. That was always the first thing he did when he finished working. "I have to start the bath water," she told Tak-Tak, who barely noticed as she hurried away. In the bathhouse, she got kindling from a pile and placed it under the big tub. She lugged a few logs off the woodpile and placed them atop the kindling and started a fire. As soon as the bath water started steaming, she would place a wooden platform in the tub so the bottom wouldn't be too hot to step in.

"Sumi-chan!" her grandfather called from the outhouse. There was a crack in the wood that he always peered out of. Sometimes he liked to talk to you right through the outhouse wall! He had no dignity because he was so old. Still, he made Sumiko smile a lot. She ran to the outhouse.

"Yes, Jiichan."

"When is party?" he said.

"I thought you didn't hear me."

"Whole neighborhood hear you," he said.

"It's Saturday."

He didn't speak. Sometimes he just stopped talking, and you didn't know whether you were supposed to wait at the outhouse or not. If you asked him if he wanted you to wait outside, he would snap that you had interrupted his train of thought. If you waited without asking, he would look surprised when he came out.

"I thinking, maybe it better I drive you to party instead of your uncle," he suddenly said. "I wait in car nearby in case you get hurt." Though Jiichan had lived in the United States for several decades, he didn't sound like it. Sometimes he spoke chanpon, which was a

mix of Japanese and English; sometimes he spoke Japanese; and when he talked to Sumiko and Tak-Tak he spoke mangled English.

Jiichan already seemed as obsessed with this party as Sumiko was.

"Jiichan! I'm not going to get hurt at a birthday party!" she said to the outhouse.

"I just thinking. But if you got no respect for old man opinion, never mind, never mind."

Sumiko laughed. "I'm going to be fine. Maybe they'll ask me to sing a song!" Was that what they did at birthday parties? She liked to sing. Once she'd even been chosen to sing a song alone during a school assembly. She'd gotten a little flustered and sung the same verse twice, but otherwise she'd done great. She imagined a crowd of classmates surrounding her at the party.

"Sumiko!" Jiichan said. "Are you listening?"

"Sorry, Jiichan. What did you say?"

"I say go get your uncle!"

She shouted out, "Uncle!!! Jiichan wants you!" Uncle looked up from the field and headed in.

"You break my eardrum," Jiichan said.

Sumiko returned to the bathhouse to check the water (not hot enough yet), went into the stable to check Tak-Tak (still brushing Baba), and hurried to the shed to grade the cut carnations Ichiro had just brought in from the field. He smiled as she passed happily by him and toward the shed.

The shed was yet another drafty building on the farm. Empty shoyu taro - soy sauce barrels - were piled on top of each other along the walls, waiting to be filled with carnations for tomorrow morning's market. Sumiko was supposed to grade the flowers and put them into the taro . That was one of her main jobs.

Flower farmers charged more for their most beautiful, biggest, nearly flawless flowers. Sumiko graded the best carnations #1, and the next best #2. Only carnations were graded inside the shed. The stock were graded right out in the field.

The worst carnations farmers sold were splits - flowers where the calyx didn't hold the petals together right. They were still pretty, but they were bought by funeral parlors or else cheap markets like street-corner flower vendors. Jiichan said men bought street-corner flowers on the way home from work on days their wives were mad at them. He said someday he was going to write a book of all his theories.

Sometimes Sumiko slipped a #1 flower into the splits because she felt sorry for the poor dead people who were getting defective flowers. But she also felt guilty that a good flower might be wasted on dead people who wouldn't even notice. So either way she felt a little bad.

As she picked up the first stem from the pile, Sumiko remembered proudly how Uncle had said she was the only one in the family whose hands were both quick and gentle - perfect hands for grading. In fact, she was the only one in the family allowed to grade the carnations. That was one reason she knew how important she was to the farm. From the beginning, Uncle and Auntie had never asked her to work, but she still remembered lying in her new bedroom after her parents died, worrying that she and her brother would get sent to an orphanage. So the next day she'd gotten up and scrubbed all the floors. Jiichan still brought it up sometimes. "I remember when your parents die, all you do is scrub floor for week. We thought you crazy." And she had not stopped working since then.

She placed a batch of #1's into the taro . Tak-Tak came in and watched her for a moment. "Do you think Baba loves me or Bull or you more?" he asked.

"Maybe she loves all of us for different reasons."

"Why does she love me?"

"Because you brush her." He was silent and she glanced at him. He was smiling to himself. Then his eyes grew curious. "Why does she love Bull?" he said.

"Because he was her first friend."

"Does she love you?"

"Yes, because I'm her friend too."

He followed her to the bathhouse to put the platform in the bottom of the tub, and then he followed her back to the shed.

Sumiko separated some of the bunches by color but mixed the colors in other bunches. Sometimes she took too long to bunch flowers because she liked them to look just so. Personally, she didn't favor the reds, pinks, and whites of carnations. She liked the stock better - they came in just about every color. Lately peach was her favorite stock color. In fact, she'd made Uncle plant a little section of just peach so that she could use the flowers for the dinner table. They reminded her of orange sherbet.

She kept the shed door open so she could keep track of who was walking in and out of the bathhouse. The men bathed in order of age, Jiichan first, then Uncle, then Ichiro, then Bull, and then Tak-Tak. After that came Auntie, and, finally, Sumiko. Every night while Tak-Tak took his bath, Sumiko went inside the house to start the rice. She always divided daytime and nighttime by when Tak-Tak finished with his bath. After he finished bathing

it was considered nighttime, and just a few mealtime chores remained before Sumiko allowed herself to stop working.

Tonight she couldn't wait until dinner was over so she could take the time to study her two best dresses and decide what to wear to the party. Auntie had made her a new dress a few months ago for a wedding. The dress actually rustled when she walked! She also owned a mint green school dress that she liked. It was a hard decision.