

Ghosts in the Garden

By Setsuko Mashima

Translated by Isabelle Charnov

Mari will soon be in the second grade. For the first time, during the spring holidays*, she will take a trip, all by herself, to her grandmother's house in Tsuruoka.

*Footnote: In Japan, school begins in spring, instead of fall.

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"How nice to see you! You really have become quite a young lady," said her grandmother lovingly. Grandmother lived in a big, old house with a huge garden that was crowded with trees. As Mari was looking around the big room of Grandmother's house in wide-eyed wonder, she had a funny feeling that she was being fiercely stared at. It must be the eyes of that fish painted on the hanging scroll in the alcove, she thought.

Flustered and a little scared, she turned quickly from the scroll and glanced out into the backyard. Just then, Grandmother said, "It's so warm today, why don't you go outside and play?"

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Mari went outside. "Wow! Let's explore this place!" she thought to herself. She hopped and skipped along the stepping stone path. A chestnut tree, toppled on its side by the winter's heavy snow, formed a bridge that seemed to invite her to walk on. In one giant step, she was on the other side. At that moment, something red, in the distance, caught her eye.

"What is that red thingamajig?" she wondered. She moved closer. The thing became clear. It was a little red house with two doors. Boldly, she pushed them open. Inside, covered with dust, stood two stone foxes.

"I know! I know what this is!" she shouted to the trees. "It's an Inari shrine."* She looked inside a second time and spied, on a corner of the floor, behind the two dust-covered fox ornaments, a rusty key and a dusty marble.

*Footnote: A guardian shrine dedicated to the god of the harvest. A pair of stone or ceramic foxes stand guard in front of the shrine.

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Mari raced over the chestnut tree bridge back to the house and breathlessly handed the old key to Grandmother.

"This really is an old key, isn't it?" Grandmother said, almost as if she were thinking aloud. "I seem to remember something about it. Perhaps this is the key to the children's chest of drawers."

"What children are you talking about, Grandma? What chest of drawers?" jabbered a curious Mari.

"A long time ago when your Grandpa was still a little boy, he and his brothers and sisters all used this chest for storing special things, but one day Grandpa lost the key---after that no one could open the drawer again."

"Let's try Grandma! Let's try to open it!" Mari took Grandma's hand and squeezed it tightly. That made her feel adventurous and unafraid as she walked along the cobweb-covered corridor. Grandma unlocked the heavy door with the key from her pocket and, as the door opened, Mari sniffed the mustiness of the old place.

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"Be careful. It's very dark here." Said Grandma as Mari followed along behind her. In the center of the storage room stood a tall, dark chest of drawers decorated with heavy wrought iron ornaments on the sides and corners.

Grandma was puzzled.

"Which one was the drawer that never opened?"

She tried to slide the key into the keyhole of each drawer, one by one. The key did not work. There was only one drawer left. Grandmother poked the key into the very bottom drawer. Slowly, the key turned. Mari could hear the click.

Mari and Grandma tugged on it and pulled it out.

"Wow!" cheered Mari.

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The drawer was filled with toys, old-fashioned toys that seemed “curiouser and curiouser “ to Mari as she helped Grandma carry the heavy drawer back to the living room.

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Curled neatly in a corner of the drawer was a bright red ribbon which Grandma unrolled, shaped into a fluffy bow and tied in Mari’s hair. The contrast of the bright red ribbon and the inky black of Mari’s hair reminded her that there was also in the storage, an old kimono. “I just remembered something, Mari. I’ll be right back.”

Alone now and enchanted by the drawer full of toys, Mari jumped when she heard the glass door rattle. She turned her head and looked outside towards the garden. There, in between the shrubs of red camellias, she saw the faces of children.

She rushed to the door and slid it open. No one was there.

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She hurried outside and looked all around. There were no children anywhere. “Weird,” she thought. She kicked pebbles into the garden pond. The water rippled into circles. The circles widened. Inside the watery spirals she could see dim reflections of children’s faces, the same children who had been standing in the shrubs.

“Mari, where are you?” called Grandma. Just then, the children’s faces vanished completely from the surface of the water.

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Mari hurried back to the house. Grandmother was carefully unfolding the old kimono which she had found in the storage.

“Here, Mari, let me dress you in this.”

Grandma put the colorful, flowered kimono on Mari and tied the sash with loving care around her little waist.

“It’s just perfect, Mari,” said Grandma, as pleased as she could be. Mari was delighted too and ran to see herself in the mirror. She twirled around and as she turned, she glimpsed the faces of those children again. They were peeping from behind the sliding paper doors.

Grandma, though, did not seem to notice anything at all. She was thinking about the special treat which she was planning.

"We are going to have *sushi* rice for dinner. While I make it, you can play with all these toys."

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As soon as Grandmother left the room, the sliding paper doors opened. The children whose faces Mari had only caught sight of before were now standing right in front of her.

"I'm Denkichi."

"I'm Hanaye."

"I'm Jihei. You're Mari, aren't you?"

"Let's play! Come on! Let's play hide and seek."

The children, whose appearance was still a surprise to Mari, took her hands and danced out into the garden.

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"Hide and seek. Come to this finger,
If you want to play.

Swing off the hill.

Tear down the mountain.

Jan-ken-pon! *

It's a tie!

Plum blossoms, cherry blossoms,

Jan-ken-pon!"

Mari became the first 'It' in this new game.

*Jan-ken-pon is a finger game like "paper, scissors, stone" which is played to decide who becomes 'It.'

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"Mari, you're 'It'!"

"Mari is 'It'."

“Mari, count to ten and don’t cheat.”

The children ran and hid in all corners of the garden.
One, two, three, four....Mari kept on counting.

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“O.K. We’re ready!” came a voice from somewhere far away.
Mari opened her eyes and looked all around. Grandmother’s big garden had so many hiding places.
She couldn’t find anyone.
She was getting scared.

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“Uh! Oh!”
As Mari ducked down and ran along under the bushes, the ribbon in her hair got caught on a branch. She wiggled to untangle herself, but her hair and her kimono got more and more tangled in the shrubs; she couldn’t get loose.

Mari started to cry.

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The children heard her crying and came running from their hiding places.

“Wow! You got all tangled up in the branches. You’ll get out. Don’t cry!”
Denkichi and Jihei untangled their frightened friend. Hanaye tied her ribbon up in Mari’s tousled hair.

At that moment, the four new playmates became four close friends. They took turns being ‘It’.
When time came to say good-bye, Hanaye said, “Tomorrow, let’s play together again. And don’t forget to wear the same kimono.”

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After enjoying the delicious sushi, they wen to Grandmother’s room. Grandmother showed Mari how to make an old-fashioned bride doll while telling stories about her own childhood.

“We used to save all kinds of pretty cloth scraps to make a doll like this. We played House, Hide and Seek, Tag...”

As Mari listened to Grandmother's stories, she kept thinking about her new friends.

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That night Mari lay on the futon* and was about to go to sleep, when she heard the sounds of giggling voices and scurrying feet.

"I wonder if my friends are still playing out there. Wouldn't that be fun?"

She was tired.

In a little while, her wondering eyes closed and she fell sound asleep.

*Futon is a Japanese bed.

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The next morning, after Mari had finished breakfast, she asked Grandma to please put the same kimono on her. When she was dressed, she picked up the colorful rubber ball from the drawer and went outside. From the other side of the garden, "yesterday's friends" came running as if they had been waiting for her.

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Mari called to her friends to come and see what she had found in Grandmother's storage room.

"My lost key! You found it, didn't you?" said Denkichi with delight.

"These marbles are mine!"

"And my Menko cards!* I looked for them for such a long time!"

The children spoke excitedly as they pulled the toys from the drawer.

*Menko is a game like Pogs.

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The children began to play with the toys right away.

Hanaye bounced the ball without missing once. Her favorite trick was to raise her leg over the high bounces and then to catch the ball in the middle of her back, singing all the time.

Denkichi and Jihei had a contest to see whose bamboo dragonfly could fly higher in the air.

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All the children played Menko cards. Denkichi flung his cards which were decorated with the faces of ancient warriors, one after another, on the grass.

He kept winning.

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The next day, the children played with bamboo sticks which they made believe were swords like the ones the warriors carried in the pictures. Mari was quick to learn how to dodge the pretend swords that whirled around her head.

She learned to spin a top, but hers always flopped over first

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'Cat's cradle' was Mari's favorite game. She showed Hanaye how to make all kinds of shapes with the strings. Hanaye showed Mari how to toss the pretty bean bags in the air.

Each day Mari wished she could play like this forever and ever, and that the fun would never stop.

Mari was so happy.

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At last the day came when Mari had to leave for home.

"I'm going home tomorrow," Mari told her disappointed friends. "I want to give these to you." The children seemed surprised as Mari put a Menko card in Denkichi's hand, a glass marble in between Jihei's thumb and forefinger and a flower-shaped marble in Hanaye's palm.

"I promise to see you again. Keep these until I come back." The three children nodded, saying silently that they would wait forever.

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"I have something for you too. Close your eyes. Keep them closed," said Hanaye. Mari closed her eyes tightly. She felt the warm spring breeze patting her hair.

"Ready. Open your eyes now."

Mari opened her eyes wide. The children were nowhere to be seen. A red barrette shaped like a camellia had been fastened on Mari's hair.

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The following day, Mari put the toys back in the drawer. She carried the drawer to the storage room. She locked the drawer.

“Please keep the key for me Grandma until I come back.”

“I hope that you’ll come and visit me sometime this summer. Until then I’ll put the key right in this box and I’ll take good care of it,” said Grandmother, smiling.

For Mari, summer couldn’t come soon enough. She kept thinking about the toys waiting for her in Grandma’s old chest and the friends waiting to play with her in Grandma’s magical garden.