

Timeless Melody

By Mukesh Williams



Author Mukesh Williams

A narrow lane led to a Japanese antique shop in Asakusa allowing ingress into a forgotten world where the past was vulnerable, releasing a desire for possession and intimacy. A dilapidated exterior against a shiny wooden door made the antique shop span a timeless yearning. Entering required a slight twist of the body to navigate the narrow doorway. Once you stepped inside, the layered aromas of a hundred years assailed your senses. The shop's labyrinthine design heightened its allure – the narrow passages, steep staircase, shining mezzanines, and half-hidden entrance to the basement added to the mysterious thrill of an upcoming discovery.

A Haunting Melody

The haunting melody of Fumiko Kawabata's husky voice singing "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" came from the basement room of a quaint antique shop. The song and the ambiance were quite intriguing. The indubitable charm of a bygone era passing through the smell of aged wood and forgotten possessions was inescapable. A longing for intimacy laced with impermanence arose. A romantic darkness of alcoves generated an ambience of seclusion. The brass stood out in the shadows, catching your eye from unexpected corners. Vintage bone china nestled languidly in sunken shelves, their delicate patterns catching the light. Brass lamps, kimono hangers, ivory netsuke, ukiyo-e prints, kimonos, decorative clocks, and ivory-hilted walking sticks were artfully arranged on side counters, each piece inviting a closer look, as if yearning to tell its tale. It was the vernal equinox and Asakusa bore a festive atmosphere, but this place had kept its serenity, perhaps for decades.

A Young Man Meets Two Lively Women

When a swarthy young man went inside the antique shop, few treasure hunters were eagerly sizing up the artifacts. Two lively young women in their mid-twenties wandered through the mezzanine floor of the shop with the wide-eyed curiosity of a child. They were admiring a vintage kimono with a *sakura* pattern on it, whispering something rapidly to each other. They got more excited as they climbed the narrow staircases to the mezzanine. Their youthful laughter suddenly echoed like the chime of porcelain bells through the silence in the shop. Signaling with their bright eyes, they started talking in whispers again.

One said, "What's this?"

The other said, "Hmm, no idea. Oh look, this is *kawaii*!"

The young man stopped holding the banister to the mezzanine floor and briefly looked at them with some interest. Then he turned his eyes to the basement. The old gramophone music was coming from downstairs. The melody was too familiar. His heart tightened when he recognized the tune. This was the song his grandmother would often hum when she was in a good mood.

The young man was continuing his journey, examining the old goods randomly. He saw the small brass lamp priced at 15,000 yen and thought it wasn't worth half the price. He went past the elderly couple who were evaluating a *tansu*, a Japanese cabinet. Then he quickened his steps past the lady at the counter who ran the antique shop. She was in her early fifties and smiled at him slyly, as she would often do to customers. As he went closer to the staircase, he heard the impressive husky vibrato coming from the very old gramophone downstairs. It made him think of his grandmother. "The past haunts us through objects, ephemera, and emotions," he thought.

An Incident

When he was about to climb and stood at the landing, he saw the two women climbing down the terribly narrow staircase laughing. They saw the man and were hurrying down the stairs. The woman in black skirt and white blouse stumbled. She tried to reach for the banister and helplessly flailed her hands to regain her balance, but all in vain. She fell on her haunches. Her friend gasped but stood still, taken by surprise. The woman's skirt had flown back, exposing her smooth thighs. The young man instantly moved towards her, his boots creaking against the wooden floorboards. Having heard the creak, she quickly got up and looked at him embarrassed at her clumsiness.

Before he could say anything, the shop owner dusting the doodads turned her head and said somewhat guiltily, "I'm sorry, the wood was polished only last week. I should have warned you. I hope you are not hurt?"

The woman mumbled, "I'm okay, I was just taken by surprise."

An old couple inspecting a silk scarf peeped out of the passage to check what had happened and turned back.

"Are you okay, Nao-chan?" said the other woman.

"Un, okay," and they burst into laughter. Then she said, "I was taken by surprise. The stairs are so slippery."

“Someone else may also fall,” said her friend with some reticence.

“Definitely. They should have put up a note of caution,” said the young man who was still looking at them. He was instantly enamored of them because of their oomph.

“Well...Nobody to blame. It just happened,” said the girl, looking at the young man.

They hesitantly smiled to each other and nodded. The song was now in repetition, “... *yasashi kata yo ... watashi wo suki to sasayaite ...*”.

The song and her charm lit up the atmosphere in the room like the burnished brass in dim light. The young man found Nao quite attractive. The way she held herself and the artifacts she chose to inspect exhibited her class. He liked the way her eyes lit up when she smiled, and from the way she looked at him he could make out that she most probably did not have a boyfriend. Her friend was demure, though she seemed to be hiding a strong determination behind her bucktooth. She was perhaps under the shadow of Nao; otherwise she would have blossomed. He found the two women’s interest in old artifacts quite intriguing.

Reading his thoughts, Nao smiled and said, “Wonder what you’re thinking?”

“Nothing in particular. The brass lamp is about fifty years old. Its form is interesting. It may not be from Japan, just like the music.”

“The music must be Japanese American jazz,” said her friend.

“I love jazz. This song must be from the 60s. I’ve heard it sometime ago.”

“You know a lot ... and ...,” said Nao.

“And?”

“And you’re quite perceptive,” she hesitantly continued.

“You also carry hidden messages,” he smiled at her.

“Really!”

“You say without saying.”

“So, she does. So, she does. Never mind,” said her friend, looking at Nao with a mischievous smile. The young man looked at her friend and smiled.

The two women continued strolling. He looked at them as they went away and whispered to himself, “Nao is a pretty girl!”

On the way downstairs, Nao looked at the young man and turned her head at an angle, raised her eyebrows, and lowered her head. The young man nodded with a telltale smile.

The young man whispered to himself, “She finds you interesting. Will you meet her again?”

His doppelgänger whispered, “Strangers often don’t meet again, but a serendipitous meeting here carries the stamp of timelessness.”

“Is that wisdom or confusion?”

“Just wisdom.”

Leaving the Antique Shop

He went out of the antique shop and breathed deeply. He didn’t

feel like leaving the place yet. Soon the two women came out of the shop. Evening had fallen. The clouds were hanging low and drifting slowly across the sky.

“The excitement inside makes the sky look calm,” said the young man.

“Yes, but look ... around the *izakayas* ... The world is bubbly. Look at the sky ... the clouds are weaving a wicker basket,” said the young man.

“You have a poetic imagination,” said Nao.

The young man said, “So you’re Nao-san, aren’t you?”

After a moment’s silence, Nao said in a small voice, “Yes, how did you know?”

“Oh, that! Your friend called for you, so I overheard.”

“Oh, I see. This is Cho ... Cho Ogawa, my best friend.”

“Hello, Cho.”

“Hi,” said Cho demurely and smiled, her bucktooth glistening.

“I’m Hirofumi. You can call me Hiro. Are you from around here? I’m not ... I live in Sangenjaya.”

It was late fall, and the rustling and swirling of leaves in sunlight was elating. Nao’s hair was flowing in the wind. Some leaves congregated by the roadside drains while others swirled wildly whenever a car passed by. The three stood waiting for the traffic lights to turn green.

Hiro said to Cho, “What a dance!”

Nao responded, “That’s true.”

Cho inquired, “What are you talking about?”

Hiro’s Second Visit to the Antique Shop

A few months went by, and in early November it began to turn cold. Hiro got busy with his job. He began working on weekends too, trying to catch up with work and his own learning. When he fell ill, his mother asked him to return to Kamakura for a few days to get his health back. In the middle of December, he went to the antique shop again. The lady at the counter greeted him, looking at him intently.

“Oh, I wonder if you’re Hiro,”

“Yes,” said Hiro somewhat surprised.

Then she whispered, “The two women have been coming over regularly. The woman with long, straight hair was inquiring after you. They usually come on weekends around this time.”

“Ah, I see,” said Hiro warmly.

By mid-day, when Hiro was about to leave, both the women walked in.

“Oh, Hiro-kun you are here! What a pleasant surprise,” chirped Cho.

“Yes, we were wondering how you were,” said Nao.

“I was unwell and went home. Now I’m okay and back,” said Hiro somewhat apologetically. “I’ve brought Hato Sabure from my hometown, in case we could meet.”

“Thank you,” said both the women.

“Are you hungry now, by any chance?” inquired Nao.
“Yes, I am. I was about to leave and have a light meal somewhere around.”

“In that case there is a sushi restaurant about ten minutes from here. The ambience is calm. Should we go there?” asked Cho.

“Sounds great!”

After the meal when they came out of the place Nao said, “Cho-chan has to go to Ueno for her music lesson. Her work is tough.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t want to go but if you don’t mind ...” said Cho.

“No, no, I’m okay,” said the young man.

“Don’t miss your class,” said Nao.

Cho left somewhat embarrassed.

“If you want, we can go back and continue our antique search,” implored Nao.

“If you have time.”

“Yes, I do.”

“By the way, your kimono style is nice. It looks like an ideal blend of traditional and modern.”

“Thank you. I love old style kimono. Their pattern and weaving express a certain meaning, and the quality of silk is much better. But I like to mix it with modern clothes for daily wear. It’s fun to think about the balance of beauty and comfort. What kind of fashion style do you like?”

“I prefer simple and practical clothes. But when I see someone stylish like you, I feel like putting some effort in dressing well.”

“Simple styles can be charming too. I think it suits you.”

As Hiro and Nao walked back to the antique shop many foreigners were having their meals on the extended roadside *izakaya*. The lights were on inside the antique shop. They went to the mezzanine floor, looking for new arrivals in the shop.

Finding a Treasure Trove

Near the gramophone downstairs, in the dark corner next to the staircase, they chanced upon a small wooden box. Hiro wondered if it was there from before. He didn’t notice it earlier. It opened when the button was pressed. Within it there was a small *kiribako*, or paulownia box. The box was neatly tied. When Nao curiously opened the box, she found two faded black and white photographs. One was of a lady in an Edo Komon kimono, and the other was of a man riding a sturdy horse. Under the photographs was a silk handkerchief with an embroidered *nadeshiko* flower. Most intriguing were the three bundles of Echizen *washi* letters tied with jute cords. A palpable warmth emanated from the ecru tone of the *washi*. When the bundles were opened, a telltale fragrance escaped from them, a mixture of *sumi* ink and *jinko* agarwood, as if yearning to be embraced. She wrote the letters vertically, using a delicate brush. Nao and Hiro looked at the letters in fascination.

Nao said, “Would it be okay to read them?”

Hiro said, “I guess so.”

With slight hesitation Nao opened the first letter. She began to

read it.

*

The weather is quickly turning cold with a crisp cold wind. I wonder if you are in good health. I was thinking of our time in the antique shop. Thank you for your kindness. The kaki persimmons are still there on the tree, yellow and quiet. The one in my garden only has a few left but I see it every morning. Dewdrop on a branch reminds me of our time. Please take care of your health.

Yours sincerely,

Chiyo

November 2, Meiji 20

Dear Seiichi san

The next letter evoked similar emotions in them.

Once more the warm whispers of the wind suggest that spring is near. With slight hope for the change, I write these words. I am now a different person. You have changed my ordinary moments into moments of unforgettable joy and pain altogether. Sunlight filtering through the shoji screen reminds me of you. The shadow of persimmon branches swaying hastens me to the stop, though I can’t. I cherish the memories of your voice as it moves through the room to me and your laughter like an unforgettable melody. My feelings for you are like the plum flower blossoming alone in the moonlight (hidden and quietly exuding the fragrance in the dark). Hiding my feelings is the only way to keep you. But how can I stay silent? A plum tree could, but I couldn’t. I wonder for how long ... You know my feelings well. That is the only comfort I have. I keep all my feeling concealed here ... in this letter that will never reach you. When you hear an uguisu chirping, remember me.

Take care of your health and be with me sometimes.

Yours sincerely,

March 15, Meiji 21

Dear Seiji san

The next letter was written in the same vein.

The warmth of the day is going away. I gaze at the shrine where we first met, but the clouds keep obscuring my view. My family donates solemnly to Senso-ji temple every year to create more good fortune. May it help you too. When the murasaki grasses touch my sleeves, I look back thinking it is you. Like the seasons, life repeats itself. If not in this lifetime, then in the next we will meet again. Stay healthy and happy. I wish you the very best.

I will always be by your side.

Chiyo

November 4, Meiji 22

Nao was nonplussed.

Hiro inquired, “What happened?”

Nao hesitated, her fingers brushing the edge of the old paper.

“Nothing much. The letters are so restrained but there’s something deeply romantic about them; they are over a hundred

years old – one hundred and ... thirty-seven years to be exact. If her surname was Koyama, it could mean one of my great-great-great grandmothers wrote these letters or someone who never got married.”

Nao tilted her head slightly.

“Isn’t that too much of the imagination?” Hiro said softly.

“Well,” she said glancing at him, “my family is one of the few Koyamas who have lived here for over two centuries, and we have been connected to Senjo-ji temple. The box feels like something that could belong to us.”

“Is it possible to find out?”

She shook her head with a faint smile.

“Yes and no. But it is not worth finding out.”

Hiro raised an eyebrow. “Why do you think so?”

Her voice dropped slightly as if sharing a secret, “*Mui-shizen* would be the best. Let’s not disturb their beautiful memory and keep the spirit where it is.”

“I agree. Let’s keep them back, as they were.”

The two stood quietly for some time letting the weight of the past settle around them like a palpable presence.

The letters were not forgotten as quickly as they had thought. They used their imaginations in different ways. Nao thought they were intimations from the past. Hiro wondered what kind of family history Nao had. But after some time, they let the incident be.

Hiro came back wondering what secret Nao kept. He was not completely new to women but uncertain of their responses and priorities. He always wondered what they were telling and what they were hiding. As for himself, he was straightforward and compassionate when necessary but valued his independence and self-sufficiency. When they met for the first time, he felt like kissing Nao, but somehow controlled his feelings. It was inappropriate. In fact, he found both the girls attractive.

Visit to Senso-ji Temple & Omikuji

It was the middle of March, but it was still cold, and plants and trees were half covered in fine snow. On that Sunday, the weather changed. Hiro decided to go to his favorite antique shop, hoping to find Nao and Cho. He had hesitated to add her name on Line, the messaging app, and she too didn’t want to share her Line identity. His heart was beating with anticipation that he would find her there.

He smiled at himself, “Silly fellow. You don’t know her, and you are behaving as if she could be your girlfriend.”

When Hiro entered the shop, the shop owner smiled and said, “Your friends are upstairs.”

Hiro smiled back with relief. “Thank you,” he replied.

It was bright and sunny outside but cool and dingy inside. He heard the voices of the two women talking upstairs. As he climbed the low mezzanine, Nao turned her head towards him and smiled. She was wearing a blue chiffon skirt and a white blouse. Her blue sandals were edged with gold. Cho in her blue jeans looked

bemused and smiled.

“I was hoping you would come,” said Nao.

“So did I,” said Hiro spontaneously, but then regretted to have showed his eagerness.

After spending half an hour and buying nothing, Nao said, “These antiques carry their histories – joyful and sad. Let’s not disturb them ... We’re planning to go to the temple close by. Would you like to come?”

“Oh, great! I guess we have the *Sanja Matsuri* in two months. That would be fun too,” said Hiro.

“That will be at the Asakusa shrine. But for now, let’s go to Senso-ji temple and do *omikuji* first,” said Nao.

Hiro nodded.

After a short walk they reached the temple which had many people milling around. Without much ado they started *omikuji*.

Cho drew the first and got “*dai-kichi*”, or great fortune. Nao got “*sho-kichi*”, or small fortune and Hiro got “*kyo*” or bad fortune.

Afterwards, Cho left them saying, “Sorry to leave you. I have my piano class at Ueno.”

Cho took away her fortune *omikuji* while Nao and Hiro tied theirs on the branch of a tree.

“I don’t seem to have much luck, neither do you. But this place mostly gives bad *omikujis*. Forget about it. I know of a nice old coffee shop here. Let’s go there,” said Nao pretending to whip up some enthusiasm.

“Don’t bother about the *omikuji*. The past may haunt us, but we can change it in the present,” said Hiro.

“I like that way of thinking,” said Nao smiling.

As they walked to the coffee shop, Nao inquired. “How’s work?”

“Getting difficult. I’m doing AI now.”

“Oh? My work is simpler. I do kimono designing for the young in our shop.”

“That’s fascinating!”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely.”

Sitting in the café Hiro watched Nao’s rounded lips and falling hair. Nao listened to his warm voice creating images of fantasy in her mind. While returning from the café Nao began humming a tune.

“Is that *La Vie en Rose*?”

“Yes, you’ve heard it?”

“Yes, I like it.”

“Let’s go to the *Sanja Matsuri* next month.”

“I’d love to.”

At the Sanja Matsuri Hiro & Nao Come Closer

The lively ambience in the *Sanja Matsuri* brought Hiro and Nao closer together. They got drunk and kissed each other between a *takoyaki* stall and a tree. On the way she was humming the jazz song. Then they went to Hiro’s apartment and spent a night. They

began to meet often. Nao felt that Hiro was a good lover who always thought about his girlfriend's satisfaction.

After a few months Hiro asked her, "Are we seeing each other?" "Aren't we already?" replied Nao, putting her arms around his shoulder.

Hiro saw Cho less often as she got busy with her graduation. Cho used to come to meet them, and often they went to different antique markets. Perhaps she understood the growing relationship between the two and kept some distance.

One day Hiro confided in Nao that his company wanted him to go to San Francisco for further training and that he would be away for three months. Nao called Cho to arrange his farewell dinner as she had a sore throat. Hiro left next week with a high spirit for new challenges to come.

Nao Passes Away Suddenly After a Brief Illness

When he was about to return from San Francisco, Hiro saw many missed Line calls from Cho. With puzzled feelings, he called Cho. She told him in a dry voice that Nao was no more.

"What do you mean? I talked to her on the phone last night."

"Yes, but you see ... she was recovering in hospital. But this morning ... I heard from her family that ... she died at night due to acute respiratory distress syndrome."

Hiro was quiet for a small eternity. Cho could hear his heavy breathing. Then the phone went dead. Hiro was in a shambles.

When Hiro returned to Tokyo, he neither visited his family nor wanted to see Cho. He went to a roadside kimono shop, and when he saw a kimono in the shop window he began to cry. Instead of lessening his grief, it increased it. Then he got angry with himself. Why should he be looking for her when she did not exist? He shied away from the places they explored together. His single-room apartment in Sangen-jaya was in total disarray. He lost all purpose in life and gave up his job. Hiro slept late into the morning and in the afternoon; he sat in parks and read Schopenhauer, which depressed him more.

In Nao's company he felt a new urgency to dress well, find new places to eat, and celebrate life.

Hiro said to himself, "She changed my perspective on life. But it happened so unobtrusively, without my noticing it. She introduced me to kimono patterns, fabrics and their seasonal motifs. From her eyes I saw a new world. From programming language, I moved to preserving tradition. The journey with her began with great gusto but ended so suddenly."

A year passed in grief and self-recriminations. He sometimes thought that Cho too must be suffering the loss of her best friend and that he must see her. But he had no emotional strength to do so.

His Apartment Doorbell Rang

Then one day his apartment's doorbell rang unexpectedly.

Hiro opened the door and found Cho standing there. "Oh, you could have called me," he said startled.

She gave him a small knowing smile "Yes, but you probably wouldn't have answered, would you?"

"... Maybe."

"Well then, may I come in?"

"No, the place is really messy now. Please wait a moment. We'll go out."

Cho waited patiently, and after some time Hiro came out. They went to a cafe.

"It's been terrible. I went into deep depression and thought the world had come to an end," said Cho, stopping to sip her iced cafe latte. "I still miss her." Tears filled her eyes.

"Yes, my mind was languishing in a cloud of sorrow. There was always a cloud. I repeated to myself never give in. It will be okay as time passes, but it hasn't. I knew grief is like a dark pond and I must be out of it, but I couldn't."

"I understand."

"Let's not talk about it. And when I saw you today ... it's just ... I don't know..."

"I knew you would say that but please bear with me. I also feel terrible ... after all, she was my best friend. Some part of me has gone with her."

With tears welling up in their eyes, the two sipped their coffee in silence. After some time, they left saying goodbye.

At the exit to the cafe Cho turned back, smiled softly, and said, "I'll come again next week around five in the evening to this cafe. If you feel like coming, please do. If you don't, I wouldn't mind."

Hiro did not answer.

A week went by, and it was early April again. Earth and vegetation were stirring. Hiro went to the cafe at five and found Cho sitting at the corner with a chair in front. Hiro felt that the past cannot haunt you forever. He began to feel that Cho came because she was genuinely concerned, not out of some obligation.

They ordered cheesecake and chocolate cake with American coffee, and while eating, Cho began to cry. "I really miss Nao-chan. Where could she be now?"

Hiro had no words to say. But he felt that though fragile, a bond was beginning to form between the two.

One day Hiro called Cho.

"Would you like to have dinner with me? Perhaps at the French restaurant in Nishiazabu in the evening.?"

"Today? What's the occasion?"

"I got a new job?"

"Wow, that's amazing. I'll be there."

"The restaurant is called *L'Effervescence*."

"Okay, let's meet at the central exit at seven."

"Sure."

When Cho arrived at the restaurant, she saw Hiro in formal wear. He was miffed. His hair fell on his forehead in disarray as he furiously punched the keys of his phone. When he found Cho

standing at the entrance the expression on his face changed.

She was wearing a pink skirt and a white blouse with black leather shoes.

“Are you coming from work?”

“Yes.”

“You look angry, but you are still fresh and exuberant.”

“Thank you,”

“It was a tough day. My job is a pain in the neck. But getting out of the office is refreshing. Maybe it’s because of the season!”

“Could be. Or maybe you have grown by taking small steps forward.”

“Yes and no. You supported me without trying to fix me.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. You listened to me,” he said gently while placing the napkin on his knees.

When Cho looked up, she smiled, “She liked you a lot. She wanted you to design her kimonos using your AI skills.”

Hiro felt at ease and smiled.

“I’m glad you understand,” said Cho.

Cho’s Recital

Another year went by, and their meetings became more frequent. Hiro began to find small joys in going to museums and small music halls with Cho.

One day, giving Hiro an invitation card for her small recital, Cho said, “I want to invite you to a piano performance, my very first.”

Hiro read her name and said, “Cho Ogawa. Wow, that’s great. I’ll definitely come.”

“The picture that Nao-chan had sent me of the antique shop’s love letters could also be read as Ogawa. My family has also lived in Asakusa for centuries. We share a similar history.”

“Really. I never thought of this coincidence.”

“Never mind. My performance is on Saturday evening. It will be late before I’m free. Then if you wait, we could go for a drink?”

“Good, good.”

It was a wonderful performance, and Cho put her entire being into it. Hiro was caught in her music. Afterwards, she drank a lot to relax. They went to Hiro’s room and made passionate love.

Early in the morning, Hiro woke up with a start. In the cold darkness he felt someone was stirring beside him. Thinking it was Nao, he reached out for her but found Cho sleeping soundly. He slowly became conscious of his surroundings. A crow had woken up in the distance, cawing the morning. Was he doing the right thing developing warm feelings towards Cho? Then he breathed deeply. Nao is no more. Looking at Cho’s long black eyelashes and porcelain skin, Hiro remembered the previous night.

When Cho woke up, she lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

Hiro inquired, “What are you thinking about?”

“I was thinking that we grieve about Nao-chan’s death, but let’s not build our relationship on our grief for her. If you think that’s

possible ... if your heart has room for me, then allow me to enter.”

“Huh, let me think.”

“I’m waiting.”

“I’m sorry I rejected you and made you feel miserable.”

“I don’t mind. I knew this would happen. I was ready for it. I have realized how fragile life is. I have realized how fragile a job is. I have realized how fragile a relationship is. I must do my best to keep it burning. The past must be forgotten and not forgotten.

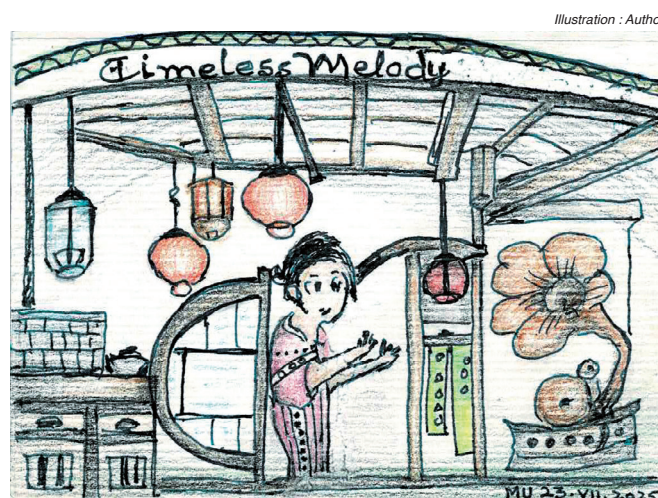
“What do you mean?”

“I mean, its shadow must not fall on the present, but it could be accessed whenever you want it.”

“Let’s keep the past where it belongs.”

Hiro looked out of the window. He saw a clear blue sky and the sun shining brightly. Hoary white *sakura* was silhouetted against the sky. He felt it was a great day to say goodbye to the departed soul. There is no betrayal, no dodging of the past. Just as the past, the future is also accessed through the mind. Only the present has to be lived. Hope springs eternal in the human breast. How can falling in love again betray her memory? Over months, Hiro began to regain his strength and the confidence to carry his past with ease. He enjoyed the leaves swirling in the autumn wind and the clouds floating in the spring. Then the song of his heart burst forth without the shadow of the past.

JS



The Antique Shop

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