

THE EMPEROR'S PLUM TREE

By Michelle Nikly

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LONG ago, in the land of the rising sun, there lived an emperor whose garden was beautiful beyond imagination. Each tree, each flower, each stone had its place in the total harmony of the design.

One morning as the emperor took his daily stroll, he stopped in dismay at a grove of plum trees. Could that tree near the wall be dying? He hurried to it. He felt a twig. It broke off in his hand, brittle and dry. The tree would have to be cut down. The perfect garden would be perfect no longer. The emperor shut himself up in his palace and refused to go out.

Days passed, and indoors, the emperor mourned his garden. At last it was decided that only a plum tree as beautiful as the one that died could restore the garden and make the emperor happy again. Messengers were sent to search the land and within a day a perfect tree was found in the garden of a painter named Ukiyo.

Ukiyo, his wife Tanka, and their small son Musuko were desolate when they learned that their tree had been chosen for the imperial garden. Ukiyo loved to paint its gnarled branches and starlike flowers, and many of the poems Tanka wrote described its beauty.

But most of all, the plum tree was the home of Musuko's friend, the nightingale. Musuko often stood at the foot of the tree and spoke to her. She replied in her own way, yet they always understood one another as true friends do.

Ukiyo knew they had to part with the tree, but he asked if they might keep it one day longer.

When the plum tree was about to be taken away, Musuko approached the emperor's messenger. He asked if he might tie a scroll to one of its branches. The messenger, seeing how bravely the boy choked back his tears, lifted him up so that he could attach the scroll.

The plum tree was replanted in the imperial garden and the emperor was persuaded to come and see it. He gazed at it while the courtiers waited anxiously. At last, to everyone's relief, he smiled. The emperor's garden was flawless once again.

Then the emperor noticed Musuko's scroll. He took it down and unrolled it.

What he saw was a wonderfully lifelike drawing of a branch of the plum tree, and perched on the branch was a nightingale. Beneath the painting was a poem.

At the long day's end,
when the nightingale flies home,
what shall I tell her?

For a long time, the emperor stood in thought before the plum tree. Then he sent a messenger to bring Ukiyo, Tanka, and Musuko to the palace. The following day, they appeared before him. He spoke first to Musuko.

"My child," the emperor said, "I will tell you what to say to your homeless friend. Tell her that her plum tree, borrowed for a day because of the emperor's whim, will be returned to her by the emperor's order."

Ukiyo and Tanka were about to protest, but the emperor would not let them.

"It seems that my sorrow has been replaced by yours. I could not bear to see this tree each day, knowing that a child lost his friend because of me. This tree belongs in your garden, but before it leaves mine, I have a request. Ukiyo, I ask you to paint my garden, perfect as it is on this day."

"The death of my plum tree has reminded me that no garden can last forever. One day the peach trees, the pines, and even the bamboos will be no more. But your painting, Ukiyo, will be a lasting reminder of this garden's perfection."

"And, Tanka, I ask you to write this story, just as it happened, so that in times to come children will hear how once the Emperor of Japan learned wisdom from a small boy named Musuko, a nightingale, and a plum tree."