

A Boy in Kimono

By Mary Potts aka Queen of the Capes
<queenofthecapes@gmail.com>

Rated PG

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Summary: Superman's estranged grandson reflects on his life.

What follows is a sequel to Dear Ojisama. Many thanks to CarolM for leafing thru it for me. ^^

I remember being little, and my mother wrapping me up in kimono. "Let's go welcome Daddy," she says to me. The memories of the next few days are faded and skattered, like autumn leaves. I remember people talking, and the sky, and flowers in a beautiful cabinet; how tired I am as I sleepily watch the lamps floating down the river and out of sight.

I'm a bit older now, and mother is once again helping me into kimono. Grandfather says that people used to dress this way all the time, but now it's something rare and special, only done on days like these. My mother looks pretty all dressed up, and I imagine that she is a princess from ancient times. "Let's go welcome Daddy," she says.

I'm old enough now to understand what's going on, and even participate. I see the grief in my mother's face as we finally light the little paper lamp together and send it down the river to lead Daddy home. "Mama?" I ask, having thought much about it during the past three days, "are you a widow?"

She laughs, and her face is colored pink. "N-no, not exactly. Perhaps, if things were different, I would have been, but..." She shakes her head. I don't quite understand. "It was something special, Kei. That's all you need to know."

Another year, another, bigger, kimono. This one used to belong to my uncle Ichi. It's funny how something so quintessentially Japanese connects me to an American ... for Mother says that my father came from the USA. I wonder sometimes how he gets to our apartment, and I wonder if we should offer hamburgers. It's beautiful weather this year, and I feel as though my father is there with us. When the last night comes, I watch the paper lamp float away; it joins the fleet of thousands of lights on their journey to the ocean.

I'm sitting on a cold metal chair, wearing my best suit and tie. It's the first year that I haven't put on kimono and greeted my father. I wonder if he's there, missing us; I wonder if he thinks that I'm a delinquent, like my teachers do.

America is such a big, strange country; I should be excited, but I'm not. I'm afraid. I've barely seen anything in the three days we've been here, because I've kept my eyes tightly shut; I only know where I am through sound.

My mother is pleading with Superman, telling us both that he is my grandfather. So much of what she says, I've never heard before. Superman gives us a pair of glasses, and tells us that the problem will go away in a few weeks. He speaks in a low voice to my mother, but I hear him anyway; he says that if all she wanted was help, then she didn't have to invent wild stories.

I can sense my mother's anger; her temper is legendary, but she's keeping it in check for my sake. Superman offers to fly us back, but she refuses. We spend our last yen on tickets home.

It's been one year since our trip to America, and once again we wear kimono and honor my father. I don't feel him this time, though. Maybe it's just my mind. Maybe he stopped coming because we weren't here last year. Maybe he was never there.

I haven't stopped thinking all week, and once we light the lamp and set it in the river, I turn to my mother. "Mother?" I ask, "did you really make it all up?"

She looks at me, horrified, and seems as though she will burst into tears. "I can live with Superman thinking I'm a liar," she says, "and with my father thinking I'm a disgrace, but if my own son does not believe who his father is, then I may as well just kill myself right here!"

I feel terrible. I'm a bad son. My mother worked so hard and sacrificed so much for me all our lives, and now I make her upset like this.

She seems to read my thoughts, and she calms down and puts her hand on my shoulder. "It's all right, Kei. You're a good boy, and it's understandable that you would ask questions."

"Why do you never tell me about my father?" I ask.

"There are things you're not ready to know," is her reply.

"I'm thirteen now!" I protest. "I'm practically a man! So how can you say...-?"

"Because I'm not ready to talk about it!" she snaps, and the tears finally come. We sit together in the darkness for a while. "Some of it I understand," she says at last. "I understand why we had to hide our love from the world. But I don't know why he didn't tell his father about us; I don't know why so much of his life was 'complicated to explain'; I don't know why, when he finally started to talk about introducing me to his parents, he died."

"Was he married?" I ask.

"He said he was not." Her answer makes me wonder if I'm not the only one who sometimes didn't believe in Father.

We watch the lamps floating by. I push my glasses further up, and Mother dabs at her eyes with her sleeve. That night, she finally talks to me about the man who was my father. She tells me everything. To be honest, she didn't have to give so much detail.

I'm waiting outside Ume's door, wearing kimono. It's been four months since I told her everything about myself, and for some reason, it feels utterly important that she comes with me today. Mother knows about Ume; I promised years ago that I'd tell her if I so much as developed a crush on a girl. They've met and seem to like each other, but this is the closest Ume will ever come to meeting my father.

I want Ume to understand who I am and where I came from. I want to be sure that she can truly accept this part of me. So much of who I am is shaped by a stranger.

She comes out the door looking radiant, and we head to my mother's apartment together. As we honor the spirits, I wonder if Father approves of this girl. When night falls on the last day, we meet with my mother again to light the little lamp. As we set it into the water, Ume takes my hand, and suddenly I know that everything is all right.

An attendant helps me into the rented kimono. It's very nice, and also very expensive. This is the first time I've worn kimono on an occasion that does not involve my father.

Ume and I had talked about having a modern wedding, with maybe a few traditional touches; but with her family being so large and my family and friends being so small and few, it seemed difficult to plan the wedding in a way that wouldn't be embarrassing. Her aunt suggested a traditional wedding. It's a rare thing these days, but it seems perfect; only so many close relatives on each side, and then everyone can mix together at the reception.

I can hear my mother outside and look to see her berating my

uncle Ichi for bringing his secretary. Uncle Ji is trying to calm the argument, but it's only making things worse. I excuse myself and leave the dressing room to stop my mother before she throws everyone out.

"I'm sorry, Kei," she tells me as I shepherd her away on the pretense of wanting her advice. "You know how I can get sometimes."

"I know."

We talk while waiting for everything else to get ready, and a sudden murmuring causes me to look up. Two strangers have shown up ... an elderly, foreign couple. "Eh? What are those people doing here?" I wonder.

"American tourists, no doubt," says Mother. "They probably thought they'd like to see a Japanese wedding or something."

"Crashing a stranger's wedding is an odd thing to do," I say.

Mother shrugs. "Eh, Americans are weird. I remember back when I was younger... before you were born, Kei... I worked at the front desk of an office; not the kind of place that would attract tourists, mind you. Well, one day, I had to leave on some emergency. As I'm on my way out the door, an American comes in and tries to ask me for something. I apologize and tell him that Miss Osaka will be able to take care of him. Do you know what happened when I came back?"

I shake my head.

"Miss Osaka tells me that the man left as soon as I did; he didn't even want anything! And I had never seen him before, or since."

The strangers have been coming closer during Mother's story; they seem to be heading straight for us. "Mr. Tanaka?" the man asks me.

I'm taken aback. "Um, yes, I'm Mr. Tanaka; what can I do for you?"

The woman with him keeps staring at me as if I have two heads.

"Your bride, Yamato Ume, wrote me letters asking me to come," he replies. His Japanese is flawless, and to top it off, he is very polite.

"Ah," I say, realization beginning to creep in. "I did not know that Ume had friends in America. Welcome..."

He looks a little embarrassed. "Actually, I had not heard of Miss Yamato before she sent her letters."

I'm confused. "I don't understand," I tell him.

"Is this your mother?" he asks in an apparent non-sequitur.

"Yes," I say. I'm beginning to get a little annoyed; Mother's annoyance is already showing.

The man in front of me bows. "I am afraid I owe both of you a deep apology," he says.

"I beg your pardon?" I glance at my mother, but she looks just as confused as I am.

"When you were twelve, you came to America to see me," he says. "... was very cold and very rude, and I treated you both unfairly. I'm sorry for that, and I'm sorry that I did not believe you, Miss Tanaka."

... America... Ume... ? My brain short-circuits. This is impossible. This is not happening. This is a dream. Kei, wake up! You have a wedding to go to!

The man is still standing before me.

"Esteemed Grandfather?" I squeak out.

"I would prefer just 'Grandfather'," he says, and gives a short, deprecating laugh. "After everything, I don't think I deserve 'esteemed'."

My heart is pounding furiously, and my mouth is dry. I can't speak, and I can't stop bowing. He introduces the woman with him as my grandmother. By now, it's too much; I manage to excuse myself and find someplace private to regain my composure.

I wash my face and quickly return to my grandparents. I'm

afraid that when I get there, they'll be gone. They are still there, though, waiting for me. Grandfather looks understanding, and a little contrite.

"I'm sorry," he says, "I know this is all overwhelming, especially on your wedding day..."

"Not at all!" I say, perhaps too quickly. "Th-thank you so much for coming! Thank you so much!"

We talk a little bit; I barely know a word I'm saying. Ume's Aunt Midori comes to look for me. "Young Tanaka? Where...? Ah!" She finds me with my mother and grandparents. "Ume's ready. If you want to run away, this is the last chance you will ever have."

"Oh! Um, yes, sorry," I stammer. "I'm ready... No, wait!" I turn to my grandparents. "Please, would it be possible for the parents of my father to attend the ceremony?"

Grandfather speaks briefly with Grandmother. "It would be an honor," he tells me.

"I know exactly where they can sit," Mother says.

I wince at the ominous tone in her voice. "Mother, please do not throw out my uncles!"

"It's all right," Aunt Midori chimes in. "Ume has told me about the situation, and there are already two extra places set."

"Your fiancée is quite a remarkable woman," Grandfather says softly, voicing my own thoughts.

I nod. "Yes, I know."

We go into the hotel shrine. My grandparents take their place across from Ume's. While Ume and I face the priest, I can't stop sneaking glances at this angel in white kimono beside me.

I'm in a white tuxedo now, and Ume sits beside me in a beautiful red kimono. The entire reception hall is red and white. We sit at the head table, eating cake and listening to my friend Himeji belt out an off-key love song.

It's quite late. When Himeji is finished, the MC takes the microphone from him. "And now, honored guests, the bride and groom would like to thank you all for coming, and to share their happiness with you in a candle ceremony."

I stand and take Ume's hand to help her up. We both take the handle of the lighter. Together, we visit each table and light the candle sitting in the center.

As we approach my grandparents' table, I start shaking. I remember a small boy and his mother lighting the candle in a paper lantern together, and watching it float away. I look at my grandfather, and it feels like I'm seeing a ghost; I can tell by his eyes that he feels the same way about me.

I'm quivering like a leaf, so Ume takes my hand to steady it. Together, we light the candle on their table. "Thank you for coming," I say softly. We pull the lighter away and linger for a while. I watch the little candle carefully.

The light remains.

THE END