

For a girl of her age, nine, she has solved the problem of loneliness rather well. She imagines loneliness as a shadow that she can chase away with a wave of her hand or a stern shout, *Whoosh! Whoosh!* And when loneliness is at its strongest, at the beginning and end of each day, when a wave or a shout are not enough, she has only to call on her brother for him to be quickly at her side. And although he merely pretends to join in her childish game of swiping at nothing and threatening the thin air, he accepts without question his role as her patron and her guide.

For her brother's protection she must agree to obey him and serve him in all things. If he complains because his trousers are damp or his vegetables are undercooked, she must find a way to restore his temper. He is the head of their little family now and if they are to have any chance of returning to their home, it will be because they have taken the very best care of each other.

The little girl's name is Miju, which in her language is the word for a small bird, one that skims across the water collecting tiny insects. She knows she is nine years old because she has been keeping a count of the days by adding stitches to the hem of her scarf, one stitch for each day and a larger stitch, in the shape of a persimmon blossom, for each full moon. She now has twelve blossoms sewn into her scarf; the last one completed that very morning. She finds it difficult to believe that they have been away from home for one whole year and worries that the memories she holds of her village and her family might be fading like an old painting. She counts the blossoms again, to be absolutely sure, and as she examines each one she takes note of the changes that have come over her sewing. The first blossoms are made up of wistful, untidy loops but the most recent ones have been sewn in a precise shape, made pretty with double and even triple outlines and a neatly curving stem.