

The Stonemason's Son

Story by **Terence McLean**

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Gen Nishikawa was wiping the bloodstains from his glistening sword — having just saved the Feudal Lord's rice supply by finishing off the last of the ne'er-do-well Tanabe clan — when wee Hikaru pounced on his chest, awakening him from his dreams of glory. "Grandfather, quick... we have to help the little boy. He fell down!"

Hikaru, an 11-year-old whose life revolves around collecting stuffed animals and reading comic books, was a bit jumpy about being in the cemetery today. Grandfather had brought her to visit her dear grandmother's grave and after offering flowers and prayer, he settled down under a nearby tree for a little daydream, back to the days of *samurai* and *ninja*. Hikaru had decided to explore the area, greeting all of the statues that she happened to come by.

"Grandfather, there's a fallen statue of a little boy over there by the big black gravestone... behind the bushes," explained an anxious Hikaru. "Maybe somebody knocked it over." Grandfather placed the tip of his sword into its sheath and gave it a confident thrust before opening his eyes. "OK, let's go help the poor lad up."

The sky was cloudy and the cicadas were chirping their summer tunes; or as Hikaru says, "whining about the humidity." The cemetery has been here at the edge of the village ever since Grandfather can remember. The village is nestled in the trees at the foot of Mount Tamaki, almost hidden between the mountain and the surrounding plain. The young people usually leave after finishing high school while the elderly loathe venturing outside of their heavily guarded rural life. The Sea of Japan is on the other side of the mountain and the nearest city is only one hour away by car, but the elderly are content to stay hidden away in their own quaint hot spring community.

Hikaru took Grandfather's weathered hand and led him toward the fallen statue.

"Look... there he is. It looks like a little boy, doesn't it?" squeaked the pony-tailed explorer. Grandfather had a scowl on his face as he gazed at the old stone

statue.

"Ah, it's those crazy teenagers who ride around on their supped-up motorbikes. Those bad apples are always up to no good. I betcha they knocked it down and rolled it over here."

Hikaru then whispered, "Hey, it looks like the boy is smiling."

Grandfather bent down and tossed a bit of water from a puddle on the face of the statue for a closer look. Indeed the little boy was wearing a slight smile — perhaps even a look of relief or contentment. Around the feet of the statue, there were footprints and broken chips of cement. Grandfather began to think about where the statue may have come from. He knew every nook and cranny of the cemetery and could probably say who was buried where, but he could not recall ever seeing a statue of a smiling little boy.

Then it dawned on him as he murmured in a hesitating raspy voice, "Oh my dear... it's the Stonemason's Son!"

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“Why didn't we stand the boy up, Grandfather?" asked Hikaru as they were driving home through the rice fields. Some of the rice stalks were laying flat, as if a helicopter had been flying low around the village. Actually there had been a lot of rain this summer and the rice fields, weighed down by blankets of moisture, were being blown flat by the winds from the sea.

Grandfather swerved to avoid two elderly women who were both making their way in a stooped-over gait — as if they were looking for something. He briefly thought about his own wife, God rest her soul, whose back had also shown the consequences of years of working in the rice fields — before the luxury of tractors and combines came along.

Grandfather then softly said to Hikaru, "We have to go to the temple." Hikaru knew that something was going on, but she had no idea as to what was on her grandfather's mind.

By the time they reached the temple, the sun was starting to set behind Mount Tamaki. If you stand at

the top of the mountain, you can see the sun set behind an island in the distance. The island is famous for fearsome red ogres who, according to legend, used to scavenge about scaring the locals. Hikaru sometimes stands on the top of her mountain, turns into her village's self-proclaimed protector, and taunts the dastardly ogres.

Grandfather slid open the large wooden doors of the temple and tossed a few coins into the collection box. He then clapped twice and said a prayer to himself. Hikaru stood behind, trying her best to be her grandfather's shadow.

"Nishikawa-san, did you see that young rip-snorter belt four hits in the game on TV last night?" asked a stout man sporting a clean-shaven head. The priest and Grandfather used to go to the same primary school back when the clatter of *geta* could be heard throughout the village. Grandfather gave the back of Hikaru's head a soft tap as she bowed and said hello.

"Oh, that skinny kid'll slow down in September. Anyway, I have something serious to talk with you about," said Grandfather. "We went to the cemetery today to visit my wife's grave and young Hikaru came across the Stonemason's Son."

"What do you mean?" asked the priest. "That statue isn't in the cemetery. Out there where the stream comes down through the woods there is a Buddhist statue that used to be called the Stonemason's Son, but the statues in the cemetery are all *jiso-samas* (guardian deity of children)."

Grandfather continued, "Well, not only is the Stonemason's Son lying in the cemetery, but now the face kinda looks like a little boy's... and he's smiling. At first I thought some local hooligans pulled a prank, but after seeing that face, I thought that I should come here and let you know that something strange has happened."

"Are you sure, Nishikawa-san?" asked the priest. "That's a pretty heavy thing for someone to haul all the way from the stream over to the cemetery."

"It's a boy all right!" blurted Hikaru as she poked her head out from behind a large paper lantern.

"I'm afraid so," added Grandfather. "I haven't been out to see the Stonemason's Son since after the big earthquake in '64, but I'm sure that we saw it today. Maybe we should take a drive out to the stream tomorrow and have a look."

"Well, little Hikaru seems pretty worked-up about this," said the priest. "If you don't mind picking me

up in the morning, let's go check it out."

Grandfather tugged Hikaru's ponytail and replied, "Be here at nine. Don't forget to watch the game on TV. Tonight's pitcher'll make that little greenhorn go down swinging. See you tomorrow."

That night Hikaru told her parents about what she found at the cemetery. Her father, Grandfather's eldest son, had never heard of the Stonemason's Son and her mother, originally from a neighboring village, was more interested in watching her favorite romance drama on TV. Grandfather, who lived upstairs, went to his room early without mentioning anything about what happened that day. Hikaru was tired of being ignored so she went to her bedroom and drew a sketch of the little boy. She drew a tiny smile on his face and asked him, "Where did you come from?" Before the boy had a chance to answer, Hikaru fell asleep.



There were more shoes than usual at the entrance to the temple the next morning. Hikaru had to step on quite a few of them, after taking off her own shoes, as she jumped onto the *tatami*. Grandfather made sure that she had neatly placed her shoes facing outward; then he turned and made a casual chopping motion with his right hand as he passed in front of the people who were already sitting on the floor. The priest and about eight other long-time-residents of the village were sipping tea as they talked about the upcoming summer festival. There was a heavy scent of incense in the air.

"Sorry we're late," said Grandfather as he gave Hikaru the familiar tap on the back of the head. She responded with an "*Ohayo gozaimasu*."

The priest poured two more cups of tea. "I called a few others and told them about what you said yesterday, Nishikawa-san. If you don't mind, we would all like to hear what you remember about the legend of the Stonemason's Son. It's been so long..."

Grandfather sat down on a cushion and motioned for Hikaru to do the same.

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you what I was told by my father when I was about my granddaughter's age." Hikaru felt a bit out of place sitting in the old dimly lit temple with a group of her grandfather's friends, but she was finally about to hear the story of the Stonemason's Son. Grandfather took another sip of his tea, unsuccessfully tried to clear his hoarse throat and began to speak:

As you all know, there's a Buddhist statue out there by the stream. Usually this kind of Buddhist statue stands holding a sword in one hand, a rope in the other and its face looks fierce. But this statue, if you look closely... the face... it kind of looks like a young boy's and he seems to be sad. Some people say that if you use the nearby ladle to toss some stream water over its head, the statue looks even sadder. To add to the poor fellow's woes, he doesn't have any legs... that is, the legs have been cemented from the ankles down.

Long, long ago there was a young couple who lived in this area with their little boy. The husband, Kenta Ishida, was a stonemason. Times were difficult back then and medicine was scarce. There was a bad disease going around and the young mother, Akiko, was worried about her son's health. Unfortunately, it was the mother who got sick and, soon after, died.

The son missed his mother. Every morning he asked his father if she was coming back and the father explained that she wasn't, but that she misses them dearly. Every night before going to bed, the father told his son stories about what a kind and happy person the boy's mother was.

The stonemason decided to make a Buddhist statue that would protect his son from harm. He started to make a statue in the likeness of a god who protects from evil and helps people to grow with strong hearts and minds. The father worked hard every night chiseling away at the stone — making a fierce-looking protector for his son. Before the stonemason could finish his task, the poor boy caught a cold which quickly led to a high fever. The father tried to care for his son and comfort him by cooling his forehead with mountain stream water, but the poor boy could no longer hold on and he passed away.

The stonemason closed his shop in mourning and dedicated all of his days and nights to finishing the statue for the sake of the other children in the village. After completing the statue, he set it up out there by the stream and then left the village without saying a word about his plans. The stonemason was never heard from again, but the statue became a place for village people to visit and pray for health and protection.

Quite a few years later, a cleaning woman was hanging the laundry out to dry behind the Geisha quarters when she saw a young boy peeping around

the back door of one of the rooms.

She asked him, "How can I help you, young fella?"

The boy asked back, "Are you my Mom?"

The cleaning woman told him that she wasn't and the boy sauntered away looking sad. The woman thought nothing of the matter until the next night when it is said that the boy was seen peeping in at the kitchen door of another house. Rumors started about the mysterious boy. No one got close enough to get a good look at him and no one knew who his parents were or where he lived.

Then one day a young man came running through the main street of the village shouting, "I saw something incredible... I saw that Buddhist statue that the stonemason made years ago... It turned into a boy and walked!"

The young man's friends doubted his ranting so they went out to the stream to have a look for themselves. When they got there, they found footprints around the statue and the face was no longer fierce... they say that if you look closely, it becomes the image of a sad little boy.

The village went abuzz. People started to come from all over to visit the statue. People from as far away as Kyoto used to come and pray for health and recovery from sickness at the statue that could 'turn into a boy and walk.' People wanted to get help from the statue before it someday walked away to another village.

Could be just rumors... I don't know, but people say the poor boy's spirit was in the statue and he was looking for his lost mother. When people who had left the village came back to pray at their ancestors' graves in the summers, it is said that the statue used to listen to them gossiping about the "kind woman at this restaurant" or the "happy woman at that house" and take human form to search for his kind, happy mother.

The village people had a meeting one night, right here in this temple, because they were worried that the boy might leave for good someday. They didn't want to lose the statue's protection so it was decided that they must do what was best for the village. They went out to the stream and pleaded, "Don't go away — stay here," as they cemented the legs of the Stonemason's Son.

Hikaru noticed her grandfather's long, grim face as he finished telling the others about the legend.

Maybe it was guilt; perhaps his father or *his* grandfather was one of those people who... Hikaru didn't have the nerve to ask. The others in the room started confirming everything that Grandfather had said. They all remembered the story; there was no need for corrections. The priest then suggested that before getting worried over nothing, they head out to the site where the statue should be standing. Hikaru tried to get up, but couldn't — her legs were asleep.

The priest rode with Grandfather and Hikaru as the group from the temple split up and drove to the stream. As they drew near, it became apparent that there was no need to get out of the cars: the statue was gone. Everyone knew that the next destination was the cemetery. Hikaru looked out the back window of the car and noticed footsteps coming from where the statue of the Stonemason's Son had been.

The cemetery looked like a collage of graves and shadows. The group got together under the big tree where Grandfather had thwarted the Tanabe clan in his dreams and waited to hear where the statue had been seen.

"Hikaru, can you remember where you saw the statue yesterday? I think it was over that way," said Grandfather as he pointed toward some bushes.

"Yeah, it's over there beside that big black gravestone," replied Hikaru, pleased that she had a hand in this mission.

The group, led by Grandfather and the priest, made its way toward the bushes. They looked behind and there it was, the Stonemason's Son, lying on its side. Hikaru heard the gasps from the others and her eyes gleamed with pride; after all, it was her discovery.

"That's it all right," said the priest as he pulled out a handkerchief to clean his glasses. "But his face... something is different."

Hikaru poked her head from around Grandfather's waist and said, "See... he's smiling. He doesn't look fierce or sad — he looks happy!" Just to prove her point, Hikaru reached down to a puddle and splashed some water over the statue. Indeed, the boy was smiling.

Grandfather, who had been silent up to now, peered over at the big black gravestone that was beside the statue and wondered aloud, "That's funny I don't remember who's grave this is." Some of the water that Hikaru had splashed on the statue had landed on the gravestone. Both Grandfather and Hikaru leaned forward to look at the name engraved on it: Akiko Ishida.

"It's the Stonemason's wife!" whispered Hikaru. "Grandfather, the boy finally found his mother. He really can walk!"

Grandfather nodded and a slight smile came across his own face as he brushed some chips of cement off of the statue's feet. "Well I'll be... he never gave up. There's no need to stand him up, Hikaru. The young fella can rest in peace — at last." ■

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