

Suki's Kimono

By Chieri Uegaki

On the first day of school, Suki wanted to wear her kimono. Her sisters did not approve.

"You can't wear that," said Mari. "People will think you're weird."

"You can't wear that," said Yumi. "Everyone will laugh, and no one will play with you."

"You need something new, Suki."

"You need something cool."

But Suki shook her head. She didn't care for new. She didn't care for cool. She wanted to wear her favorite thing. And her favorite thing was her kimono.

Suki's obachan had given her the kimono. The first time Suki wore it, her obachan took her to a street festival where they slurped bowls of slippery, cold somen noodles and shared a cone of crunchy, shaved somen ice topped with a sweet red bean sauce.

Under strings of paper lanterns, Suki joined her obachan in a circle dance. She followed her and copied her movements, trying to be as light and as graceful. She watched the other women and children who danced, especially those who were dressed in cotton kimonos like her.

Later, Suki sat so close to the stage that when the taiko drummers performed, bom-bom-bom-bom, she felt like she'd swallowed a ball of thunder, and her whole insides quaked and quivered.

Before they left the festival, Suki and her obachan stopped at a souvenir stand. There were many things to choose from, but her obachan found the prettiest thing of all - a handkerchief of pale pink linen, decorated with tiny maple leaves and cherry blossoms. When she gave it to Suki, she said, "This will help you remember our day."

Now, it was time for school. Mother checked Suki's obi one last time and took a picture of Mari, Yumi, and Suki together by the front steps.

Then, as she watched, the three sisters made their way down the block to their school. Mari and Yumi stayed several paces ahead of Suki and pretended they didn't know her.

But Suki didn't mind.

She turned and waved to her mother before she clip-clipped along in her shiny red geta, feeling very pleased in her fan-patterned blue kimono.

Once in a while, Suki would lift her arms and let the butterfly sleeves flutter in the breeze. It made her feel like she'd grown her own set of wings.

When they reached the school, Mari and Yumi hurried across the yard to a group of their friends. Suki stopped and looked around. Some of the children turned and stared at her, and others giggled and pointed at her kimono.

But Suki ignored them.

She took a seat on a swing to wait for the bell. A girl dressed in overalls just like a pair Suki had at home sat on the swing beside her.

"Hi, Suki," said the girl.

"Hi, Penny," said Suki.

"How come you're dressed so funny?" Penny asked. "Where did you get those shoes?"

Suki lifted her feet off the sand and wiggled her toes. "I'm not dressed funny," she said. "My grandma gave me these shoes."

Suki started pumping her legs. After a moment, Penny did the same, and soon they were both swinging as fast and as high as they could. Swoosh, swoosh, up and up.

When the bell rang, Suki and Penny jumped off their swings and ran to the gym for the first day assembly. Once they were finally taken to their new classroom, Suki chose a desk near the window. Penny chose a desk next to Suki.

As they waited for everyone to find a seat, two boys in front of Suki turned and snickered behind their hands. One of the boys reached over and snatched at Suki's sleeve. "Look at this," he said. "She's a bat!"

Suki felt her cheeks burn, but she did not respond. Instead, she concentrated on sitting up straight and tall, the way her obachan always did. It was easy to do with an obi wrapped snug around her middle. Her obi was golden yellow, and in its folds Suki had tucked away her pale pink handkerchief.

"Welcome to the first grade," said the teacher. "My name is Mrs. Paggio." She smiled. "Let's introduce ourselves and tell everyone what we did this summer."

When it was her turn to speak, Suki stood up and told the teacher her name.

"Hello, Suki," said Mrs. Paggio. "What did you do this summer?"

"My grandma visited us," she said, straightening her sleeves. "She brought me my kimono and my geta." Suki raised her foot to show the teacher her wooden clog.

Somewhere in the classroom, someone laughed, but Suki took a deep breath and continued. "The best thing was that she took me to a festival. And there were dancing girls, dressed like me, and they danced like this." She took a few steps and swayed her arms sideways.

"Look, now she's dancing," someone said. But Suki didn't hear.

She hummed the music she remembered hearing at the festival.

She remembered how it felt to dance barefoot in the open air, on fresh-cut grass that tickled her toes.

She tried to picture the other dancers. How they moved forward in the circle with the rhythm of the music. How they stamped their feet, first right, then left, swung their arms, first up, then down. How they stepped back, and back, and back, then clapped.

When Suki couldn't remember the next step, she made it up, just to keep dancing. One-two, one-two, one-two, stop.

When she finished, the room seemed very quiet. Everyone was watching her. Suki sat down, wondering if she was in trouble.

But Mrs. Paggio said, "That was wonderful, Suki." And she started to clap.

Then, so did Penny.

And after a moment, so did the entire class.

After school, as the three sisters walked home together, Mari and Yumi grumbled about their first day.

"No one even noticed my cool shoes," said Yumi.

But Suki just smiled.

As she clip-clopped along behind them, Suki pulled out the pale pink handkerchief from her obi and held it up over her head to catch the wind. And in her blue cotton kimono and in her shiny red geta, Suki danced all the way home.