



Story: Grandfather Cherry Blossom

Cherry blossoms, with their unearthly beauty, have become a symbol for the idea that all things, even the most beautiful, must pass. This old tale shows how one thing becomes another and still passes on the good spirit within.

Long ago in Old Japan, in a little village there lived an old man and his wife. They were poor, but they lived a peaceful life. Their only sorrow was that they never had any children.

Early one morning the old woman was out working in her garden when she heard whimpering of a small animal. Among her vegetables she found a new-born, snow-white puppy. She wrapped the puppy in her apron and brought it home.

"My dear husband, look what I found in the garden!"

The old man was very happy to see the puppy and thought he may be a gift from Heaven. The couple decided to raise the puppy as if he was their own child. They named him Shiro, which meant "white."

The old couple loved Shiro very much. Whenever they had a rice cake or a piece of fish, they would give a half of it to Shiro first, and share the rest themselves. Shiro grew up to be a strong and smart dog. He was an *Akita** and looked like a small white wolf. The old man took Shiro with him wherever he went.

One sunny day, the old man heard Shiro barking for a long time in the field at the back of his house. He went out to see what was going on. Shiro immediately came running, wagging his tail. He caught hold of the end of the old man's kimono, and tugged him to a shady spot under a tree. There the dog began to dig the ground with his paws, yelping with joy.

"Shiro, what are you doing? Are you trying to dig something out?"

The old man went back to the house to fetch a spade, and helped Shiro dig. To his great surprise, after digging for some time, he found a heap of ancient and valuable gold coins buried deep in the ground!

"I cannot believe this! Shiro, how did you find this treasure?"

Shiro sat there proudly as if to say, "You see, even though I am only a dog, I wanted to repay you for all the kindness you have shown me!"





The old man ran to get his wife, and together they carried the treasure home. The gold coins had been buried there by someone hundreds of years ago. The old man and his wife were now wealthy. They would never go hungry again.

Everyone said the old man was very lucky. But the old man said, "I'm lucky not because of the money, but because I have such a good friend." He generously shared his money with all his neighbors.

Shiro and the old couple lived happily for many, many years. Shiro was getting old. One autumn evening Shiro ate his dinner and lay down, resting his head on the old man's lap. Shiro closed his eyes, and never opened them again.

The old man and the old woman were heartbroken. They cried for many days. They buried Shiro in the backyard, and stuck a pine branch on the spot to mark Shiro's grave. They went to visit the grave every day.

Then a strange thing happened. The little pine branch stuck in the ground took roots and began to grow very fast. In just a few weeks it became a great big pine tree.

The old woman said, "My dear husband, remember how Shiro used to love to eat rice cakes? Let us make a mortar from the wood of this pine tree, and make rice cakes in memory of Shiro."

So the old man cut down the tree and made a mortar out of its trunk. When he filled the mortar with steamed sweet rice and began pounding the rice with a pestle, another magical thing happened. The rice became more and more, until it overflowed and filled their entire kitchen!

"The kind spirit of Shiro is still with us," the old man said. He gave extra rice to everyone in the village, and still had plenty for his wife and himself.

Now the *Samurai* lord who ruled the region had a selfish and greedy prince. The prince heard about the magic mortar, and wanted it for himself. He sent soldiers to take it away from the old couple.

But when the greedy prince tried to pound his rice in the mortar, the magic did not work. It only worked for the old couple. The prince became angry.

"Burn this dumb mortar!" he ordered.

When the old man heard that his precious mortar was burned, he was very sad, but there was nothing he could do. He went to the castle and asked for the ashes of the mortar. He was taken to the hearth, and he brought home a basket full of ashes.

"My dear wife, Shiro's pine tree has turned into ashes."





He went out to his wife's garden to scatter the ashes around. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew some of the ashes toward a clump of old cherry trees. Then another miracle took place!

It was already wintertime, and the cherry trees were bare. Yet, as soon as the ashes touched their branches, the trees burst into bloom. The old man's backyard was transformed into a beautiful picture of spring.

"This is another gift from Shiro!"

The old man walked around the village, scattering ashes over other trees. Soon the whole countryside was filled with beautiful cherry blossoms, and the old man's heart was filled with joy in the memory of his best friend.

Word spread and reached the *Samurai* lord's ears. He invited the old man to the castle and asked him to make his cherry trees blossom. When the old man did, using what was left of the ashes, the *Samurai* lord was very impressed. He wrote a *haiku* poem and gave it to the old man. It said:

*Loyal spirit lives
In the hearts of man and beast;
Makes withered trees bloom*

The old man replied with his own *haiku*:

*Joy and sorrow fade
As wind blows through the cherries
But friendship remains*

The *Samurai* lord apologized to the old man for his son's bad behavior. He severely punished the prince for his greed and selfishness. He rewarded the old man with silver and gold, and sent him home with great honor.

After that, everyone called him Grandfather Cherry Blossom. The old man and the old woman lived quite happily for many more years.

* The *Akita* is a breed of large dog native to Japan.

