

FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL

Story Material

The Golden Cracks

A deeply moving story set in Kyoto about a grieving teenager who learns kintsugi and discovers beauty in imperfection.

Level: B1

Skill: Reading

Duration: ~45 min

Age: Teens (11-16)

Topic: Culture & Healing

Pages: 20

The Story

Chapter I— The Broken Girl

The shinkansen cut through the Japanese countryside like a white arrow, fields of rice and clusters of mountains blurring past the window at three hundred kilometres per hour. Hana Nakamura sat in seat 14A, her forehead resting against the cool glass, watching her reflection superimposed on the landscape — a ghost-girl floating through green valleys and concrete cities. She was sixteen years old, and she felt like she was made of broken pieces held together by nothing more than habit.

Her mother had died seven months ago. Cancer. Fast and cruel. One day Mama was laughing in the kitchen, flour on her cheeks from making gyoza dumplings. Three months later, she was gone. Hana's father, Kenji — a quiet, gentle man who designed bridges for a living and had no idea how to talk to a grieving teenager — had done the only thing he could think of: he had sent Hana to Kyoto for the summer, to stay with his aunt, Obasan Yuki, whom Hana had met exactly three times in her life.

"It will be good for you," her father had said at Tokyo Station, handing her a bento box she did not want and a ticket she had not asked for. "Yuki-san is... different. She lives in a different way. I think she can help." Hana had not argued. She did not argue about anything any more. She did not cry, either. She did not laugh, read, listen to music, or talk to her friends. She existed — silently, carefully, as if any sudden movement might cause her to shatter completely. Her **grief** was not a wave that came and went. It was a climate. It was the weather inside her body, every hour of every day.

Kyoto Station was enormous — a cathedral of glass and steel that seemed to belong to a different century from the ancient city outside. Obasan Yuki was waiting at the exit: a small, straight-backed woman of sixty-eight with silver-streaked hair pulled into a neat bun and eyes that seemed to see more than they should. She did not hug Hana. She did not say "I am sorry about your mother." She simply picked up Hana's suitcase, said "Come," and walked towards a taxi. Hana followed. It was the beginning of the strangest and most important summer of her life.

Chapter II— The House on— Philosopher's Path

Chapter III— Master Tanaka

Obasan Yuki's house was a traditional machiya — a narrow wooden townhouse in the Higashiyama district, on a quiet lane off the famous Philosopher's Path. The house was over a hundred and fifty years old, with sliding paper doors, tatami mat floors, and a small courtyard garden containing a stone lantern, a maple tree, and a tiny pond where three orange koi moved slowly through the green water. Everything in the house was deliberate, considered, placed with intention. A single flower in a ceramic vase. A scroll of **calligraphy** on the wall. A pair of wooden chopsticks resting on a porcelain stand.

Yuki was a **ceramics** artist. The back of the house opened onto a workshop where she made tea bowls, plates, and vases using techniques that had not changed in centuries. A wood-burning **kiln** stood in the yard, blackened by decades of firing. Shelves held finished pieces — some perfect, some deliberately irregular, all beautiful in ways that Hana did not immediately understand. "You will sleep in the east room," Yuki said, showing her a space no bigger than Hana's bathroom in Tokyo. "Breakfast is at six. We begin work at seven. Dinner is at six in the evening. You may do whatever you wish in between." "What kind of work?" Hana asked. It was the first question she had asked in weeks. "You will see," Yuki said, and slid the door closed.

The next morning, Yuki took Hana to a workshop three streets away. It belonged to a man named Master Tanaka — an **artisan** who had been practising **kintsugi** for over fifty years. He was seventy-three years old, small and wiry, with hands that were simultaneously rough from clay and precise as a surgeon's. His workshop was a single room with a low wooden table, natural light from a north-facing window, and dozens of ceramic objects in various stages of repair: bowls, cups, plates, teapots — all broken, all being made whole again with gold.

"**Kintsugi**," Yuki explained as Tanaka prepared his materials, "is the art of golden repair. When a piece of pottery breaks, instead of throwing it away or trying to hide the damage, we repair it with **lacquer** mixed with powdered gold. The cracks become visible — beautiful, even. The **philosophy** is that breakage and repair are part of the object's history, not something to be disguised." Master Tanaka held up a tea bowl that had been broken into five pieces and reassembled with seams of bright gold. The lines of gold ran across the surface like rivers on a map, catching the light. The bowl was more beautiful broken and repaired than it could ever have been whole.

Chapter IV— Learning to See

Hana spent the first week watching. Master Tanaka did not ask her to do anything. He simply worked, slowly and carefully, while she sat on a cushion in the corner and observed. She watched him clean the broken edges of a bowl with a tiny brush. She watched him mix **urushi** — natural **lacquer** harvested from Japanese lacquer trees — with fine gold powder until it formed a paste the colour of sunset. She watched him apply the paste to the cracks with a bamboo spatula so thin it was almost invisible, filling each gap with the precision of someone writing a love letter.

The process was agonisingly slow. Each layer of lacquer had to dry for days in a controlled environment before the next could be applied. A single repair could take weeks. "Why not use glue?" Hana asked on the third day. It was the first time she had spoken in the workshop. Tanaka did not look up. "Glue hides. Lacquer and gold celebrate. The question is not how to fix something quickly. The question is how to honour its history." He turned the bowl in his hands. "Every crack tells a story. If you cover the crack, you lose the story."

In the second week, Tanaka gave Hana her first task: to practise applying lacquer to a broken tile. The tile was simple — a plain square of fired clay that had been snapped in half. Her job was to fit the pieces together and seal the join with lacquer. It sounded easy. It was

not. The lacquer was sticky and temperamental. Too much, and it oozed. Too little, and the join was weak. The pieces had to be aligned perfectly, held in place with string and tiny clamps, and left undisturbed for seventy-two hours. Her first three attempts failed. The fourth held.

"Good," Tanaka said, examining the join under his magnifying glass. "Now do it again. Better." Hana felt a flash of irritation — then something she had not felt in months. Focus. The kind of concentration that leaves no room for sadness, because every gram of attention is directed at the task. Her hands stopped shaking. Her breath slowed. For twenty minutes, there was nothing in the world except clay, lacquer, and the precise movement of her fingers. When she looked up, Tanaka was watching her with a quiet smile. "You felt it," he said. "The stillness." She nodded. "That is why we do this. Not for the gold. For the stillness."

Chapter V— Kyoto

Outside the workshop, Kyoto unfolded around Hana like a scroll painting being slowly revealed. The city was a contradiction: ultramodern convenience stores next to eight-hundred-year-old temples, bullet trains stopping beside gardens that had been raked in the same patterns since the Muromachi period. Obasan Yuki walked Hana through the city in the evenings after dinner, teaching her to see — not as a tourist, but as someone who lived in the layers.

They visited Fushimi Inari, the **shrine** with ten thousand orange gates climbing the mountainside like a tunnel of fire. They walked through Arashiyama, where the bamboo forest made a sound like rain even when the sky was clear. They sat in the rock garden at Ryoan-ji — fifteen stones on white gravel — and Yuki told Hana that no matter where you sat, you could only see fourteen stones at once. "The fifteenth is always hidden," she said. "That is the lesson. You can never see everything. Accepting that is the beginning of wisdom."

The food was extraordinary and simple. Yuki cooked traditional Kyoto cuisine — *kaiseki* — which treated every meal as a small work of art: grilled fish on a ceramic plate shaped like a leaf, pickled vegetables arranged by colour, miso soup with silken tofu from a shop that had been making tofu since 1635. "In Kyoto," Yuki said, "we believe that how you present food is as important as how it tastes. Beauty nourishes the eyes before the mouth." They ate at a low table in the garden, listening to the wind chimes and the gentle splash of the koi pond.

Hana began to notice things. The way sunlight moved across the tatami mats at different hours. The sound of the bamboo deer-scarer in the garden — a hollow clack every thirty seconds, like a wooden heartbeat. The smell of incense from the neighbourhood temple, drifting through the open windows. Kyoto was not a loud city. It did not demand attention. It invited it. And slowly, reluctantly, Hana began to accept the invitation. She began, for the first time since her mother's death, to pay attention to the world around her. Yuki noticed. "You are waking up," she said one evening. Hana did not deny it.

Chapter VI— The Mother's Bowl

Three weeks into the summer, Yuki placed a small wooden box on the table after dinner. Inside, wrapped in a square of indigo cloth, were the broken pieces of a tea bowl. It was a

chawan — a wide, shallow bowl used in the Japanese tea ceremony. The clay was a warm grey-brown, and the glaze, where it was still intact, had a soft blue-green shimmer like the surface of a pond. "Do you recognise this?" Yuki asked. Hana stared at the pieces. Something shifted in her memory — a kitchen, a table, a woman's hands. "Mama's bowl," she whispered.

The story came back in fragments, like the bowl itself. When Hana was four, she had knocked the bowl off the kitchen counter while reaching for a biscuit. It had shattered on the tile floor. Her mother had not been angry — she had held Hana, told her it was just an object, and carefully collected every piece in a cloth. She had kept them in this box. "Your mother asked me to repair it one day," Yuki said. "She wanted to learn kintsugi herself, but she never had the chance. The box has been in my cupboard for twelve years, waiting." She looked at Hana. "I think it has been waiting for you."

Hana's hands trembled. She had spent seven months trying not to feel — building walls around her **grief**, keeping the pain at a distance where it could not reach her. Now, looking at the broken pieces of her mother's bowl, the walls cracked. She cried. She cried for twenty minutes while Yuki sat beside her, saying nothing, just being present. When the tears stopped, Hana felt different. Not healed — not yet — but lighter. As if something that had been trapped inside her chest had finally been released.

The next morning, she took the box to Master Tanaka's workshop. He unwrapped the pieces with the reverence of someone handling a sacred text. Eleven fragments, ranging from the size of a thumb to the size of a palm. He examined each one under his magnifying glass, turning them slowly, mapping the breaks. "This is good clay," he said. "And the breaks are clean. It will repair beautifully." He looked at Hana. "But you must do it. Not me." "I am not ready," she said. "Nobody is ever ready," he replied. "That is why we begin."

Chapter VII— Piece by Piece

The repair took three weeks. Every morning, Hana arrived at the workshop at seven and worked until noon, guided by Tanaka's quiet instructions. She cleaned each fragment with cotton and distilled water. She fitted the pieces together like a three-dimensional puzzle, finding where each edge met its partner. She mixed the lacquer and gold powder with the care of a chemist, measuring proportions that Tanaka had refined over half a century. She applied the paste to each crack, millimetre by millimetre, holding her breath, steadying her hands.

Between applications, while layers dried, Tanaka talked. Not about technique — about **philosophy**. About **wabi-sabi** — the Japanese **aesthetic** that finds beauty in **imperfection**, impermanence, and incompleteness. About the Buddhist idea that suffering is not something to be avoided but understood. About the tea masters who deliberately chose cracked and irregular bowls for their ceremonies, because perfect symmetry was considered lifeless. "The crack is not a failure," he said one morning. "It is evidence that the bowl has lived. That it has been used, loved, and tested. The gold does not hide the damage. It illuminates it."

Hana began to see the connection. The bowl was broken. She was broken. The bowl could not go back to what it was before. Neither could she. But the bowl, with patience and care and gold, could become something new — something that carried its history in its surface,

visible and beautiful. Was it possible that she could do the same? That her **grief** was not a darkness to be endured but a golden line in her story — painful, yes, but also meaningful, also part of who she was becoming?

She started writing in a notebook. Not a diary — she had tried that and hated it. Instead, she wrote down things her mother had said, recipes her mother had cooked, songs her mother had sung. She wrote about the way her mother laughed — head back, eyes closed, completely committed to the joy of the moment. She wrote about the gyoza dumplings, and the flour on her cheeks, and the sound of her voice calling Hana in for dinner. She was not trying to preserve her mother. She was trying to honour her — to trace the golden lines of memory through the cracks of loss.

Chapter VIII— The Completed Bowl

On a warm morning in late August, the final layer of gold was applied and the bowl was complete. Hana held it in both hands, turning it slowly in the light from Tanaka's north-facing window. The eleven fragments were now one piece again, joined by rivers of gold that caught the sunlight and glowed like veins of fire. The bowl was not the same as before. It was better. More interesting. More honest. Every line of gold said: I was broken, and I was repaired, and I am more beautiful for it.

Tanaka poured tea into the bowl — matcha, the bright green powdered tea used in the ceremony. The golden cracks disappeared beneath the liquid, then reappeared as Hana drank, the lines emerging through the green like a secret message being revealed. "Your mother's hands held this bowl," Tanaka said softly. "Your hands broke it. Your hands repaired it. Three generations of touch in one object. That is what kintsugi is. Not just **restoration**. Connection."

That evening, Yuki prepared a small tea ceremony in the garden. Just the two of them, kneeling on a rush mat beside the koi pond as the sun set behind the maple tree. Yuki made the tea with the precise, graceful movements that Hana had come to recognise as a form of **meditation** — every gesture intentional, every moment given its full weight. She served the tea in Hana's repaired bowl.

Hana held the bowl and looked at the golden lines. She thought about her mother — not with the paralysing **grief** that had consumed the past seven months, but with a feeling she could only describe as grateful sadness. Sad that her mother was gone. Grateful that she had existed. Grateful for the flour on her cheeks, the laughter in the kitchen, the hands that had held this bowl. "Mama would have loved this," Hana said. "She does," Yuki replied. They drank their tea in silence as the first stars appeared above Kyoto.

Chapter IX— Going Home

On her last morning in Kyoto, Hana packed her suitcase. It was heavier than when she had arrived — not just with the gifts Yuki had given her (a set of ceramic chopstick rests, a book on **wabi-sabi**, a jar of Yuki's homemade pickled plums) but with something less visible. Understanding. She carefully wrapped the repaired tea bowl in the indigo cloth and placed it in the centre of her bag, surrounded by clothes for protection.

At the door, Yuki held both of Hana's hands. "You came here broken," she said, with the directness that Hana had learned was not unkindness but honesty. "You are still broken. That will not change. Your mother is gone, and that crack will never fully close. But now you have gold in the cracks. You have learned that damage is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of a different story — a more interesting one." She squeezed Hana's hands. "Go home. Live. Let people see your gold."

On the shinkansen back to Tokyo, Hana sat in the same seat — 14A — and watched the landscape pass in reverse. The same rice fields, the same mountains, the same ghost-girl reflected in the glass. But the girl was different now. The broken pieces were still there. They would always be there. But they were held together by something stronger than habit. They were held together by gold.

Her father was waiting at Tokyo Station. He looked nervous, uncertain, the way he had looked every day since her mother's death — as if he wanted to help but did not know how. Hana walked up to him and did something she had not done in seven months. She hugged him. He stiffened with surprise, then wrapped his arms around her and held on as if she were the only solid thing in the world. They stood like that for a long time, two people held together by love and loss and the slow, difficult work of repair. "How was Kyoto?" he asked eventually. "It was exactly what I needed," she said. And she meant it.

Chapter X— The Golden Line

Back in Tokyo, Hana placed the repaired tea bowl on the family altar — the small Buddhist shelf where her mother's photograph sat beside a vase of fresh flowers that her father replaced every week without fail. The golden cracks caught the light from the window and cast tiny patterns on the wall. Her father stared at the bowl for a long time. "Your mother loved that bowl," he said. "I remember when you broke it. She was not angry at all." "She kept the pieces," Hana said. "She always planned to repair it." Kenji touched one of the golden lines with his fingertip. "It is more beautiful now," he said quietly. "Yes," Hana said. "That is the point."

She returned to school in September. She was not the same girl who had left — silent, withdrawn, made of broken pieces and habit. She was still quiet, still sad sometimes, still carrying the weight of loss. But she had learned something in Kyoto that she carried like a secret treasure: that **imperfection** was not weakness. That damage was not the end. That the most beautiful things in the world were the ones that had been broken and repaired with care, patience, and gold.

She started a kintsugi club at school. Mr. Hayashi, the art teacher, gave her the supply cupboard as a workshop. She ordered lacquer and gold powder online, watched Master Tanaka's tutorial videos, and taught herself to repair simple pieces. Word spread. Students brought broken mugs, cracked plates, chipped vases — objects they would have thrown away. Hana repaired them, and each one left her workshop more beautiful than it had arrived: ordinary objects made extraordinary by golden lines that said, plainly and proudly, *I was broken, and I survived.*

Other students began to talk to her — not with the careful pity that people reserve for the bereaved, but with genuine curiosity. They wanted to understand the **philosophy**. They wanted to learn the technique. And some of them, Hana realised, wanted something else: permission to be imperfect. Permission to be broken. Permission to believe that their cracks — their failures, their losses, their scars — were not things to be hidden but things to be honoured. She gave them that permission, one golden line at a time.

Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Kintsugi	The Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold, making it more beautiful
Artisan	A skilled worker who makes things by hand using traditional methods
Ceramics	Objects made from clay that is shaped and then hardened by heat
Apprentice	A young person learning a skill or trade from an experienced master
Philosophy	A system of beliefs about the meaning of life and how to live
Imperfection	A fault or weakness; the state of not being perfect
Lacquer	A hard, shiny coating applied to surfaces, traditionally from tree sap
Kiln	A special oven used for hardening clay or ceramics at very high temperatures
Shrine	A holy place dedicated to a god or a respected person
Grief	Deep sadness, especially caused by the death of someone you love
Meditation	The practice of focusing the mind quietly to achieve calm and awareness
Resilience	The ability to recover from difficulties and become stronger
Restoration	Returning something damaged to its original or improved condition
Fragile	Easily broken or damaged; delicate
Heritage	Cultural traditions, skills, or objects passed down through generations
Aesthetic	Concerned with beauty and the appreciation of beauty
Mindfulness	Paying careful attention to the present moment without judgement
Wabi-sabi	A Japanese concept finding beauty in imperfection and impermanence
Transform	To change something completely, usually for the better
Legacy	Something meaningful left behind for future generations

Comprehension Quiz

1. Why did Hana's father send her to Kyoto for the summer?

- A) To study for university entrance exams
- B) Because he was worried about her grief and thought the change would help
- C) To learn Japanese cooking
- D) Because she had won a scholarship

2. Who was Master Tanaka?

- A) A famous painter who lived in Tokyo
- B) A retired university professor
- C) A kintsugi artisan who had been repairing pottery for fifty years
- D) Hana's school teacher in Kyoto

3. What is the philosophy behind kintsugi?

- A) That broken things should be thrown away
- B) That damage and repair are part of an object's history and make it more beautiful
- C) That gold is the most valuable material
- D) That only perfect objects have value

4. What was special about the tea bowl that Hana chose to repair?

- A) It was made of solid gold
- B) It was over five hundred years old
- C) It had belonged to her mother and was broken when she was a child
- D) It was the largest bowl in the workshop

5. How did kintsugi help Hana deal with her grief?

- A) It distracted her from thinking about her mother
- B) It taught her that broken things — and broken people — can become more beautiful through healing
- C) It made her want to become a professional potter
- D) It helped her forget her past completely

6. What did Master Tanaka mean by 'the gold is not hiding the damage'?

- A) That real gold is transparent
- B) That the repair celebrates the break rather than disguising it — the history is honoured, not erased
- C) That the bowl was never really broken
- D) That gold paint is invisible

7. What was wabi-sabi?

- A) A type of Japanese food
- B) A martial arts technique
- C) A Japanese aesthetic concept that finds beauty in imperfection and impermanence
- D) A festival celebrated in Kyoto

8. How did the summer in Kyoto change Hana?

- A) She became angry and wanted to return to Tokyo immediately
- B) She learned to accept her grief as part of her story and found strength in imperfection
- C) She decided to never think about her mother again
- D) She became a professional ceramics dealer

9. What did Hana do with the repaired tea bowl?

- A) She sold it for a large sum of money
- B) She placed it on the family altar next to her mother's photograph
- C) She gave it to Master Tanaka as a gift
- D) She donated it to a museum

10. What is the main message of the story?

- A) That Japanese pottery is the most valuable art form
- B) That our cracks and scars — physical or emotional — are not flaws but golden lines in our story
- C) That grief should be avoided at all costs
- D) That only experts can repair broken objects

Answer Key

#	Ans	Question
1	B	Why did Hana's father send her to Kyoto for the summer?
2	C	Who was Master Tanaka?
3	B	What is the philosophy behind kintsugi?
4	C	What was special about the tea bowl that Hana chose to repair?
5	B	How did kintsugi help Hana deal with her grief?
6	B	What did Master Tanaka mean by 'the gold is not hiding the damage'?
7	C	What was wabi-sabi?
8	B	How did the summer in Kyoto change Hana?
9	B	What did Hana do with the repaired tea bowl?
10	B	What is the main message of the story?

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