

The Daily Miracle

Short stories

Written

By Anna Stahn

Translated

By Yukako Atsuchi

The Daily Miracle

The Daily Miracle is four short stories about sorority, fallen-fruits, jealousy and companionship written by Anna Stahn on her stay in Kofu, Japan.

Anna Stahn is a Copenhagen based writer and visual artist. She is a student at The Royal Danish Academy Of Fine Arts in Denmark; in the morning when there is she meaning she writes, in daytime when there is clarity she draws and in the evening when there is feeling she walks her poodle and works at a bar.

Previously Anna has made exhibitions, directed a film in Tokyo and lived in New York where she wrote at libraries. She is a writer of artist texts, essays and poetry for magazines and a co-founder of the publishing house Longetti.

Born 1994 in Denmark where she grew up an only child with four parents and as a worried, spoiled socialist.

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Anna Stahn

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Translated to Japanese by Yukako Atsuchi



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*In this book there are quoted and stolen from Maragret Atwood, Sayaka Murata,
Yoko Tawada, Björk lyrics, Gertrude Stein and Francis bacon.*

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stahnanna@gmail.com

www.annastahn.dk



This book and translation is dedicated to my friends in Tokyo

And to the people I bump into who, with one look, can make me alive

The last short story 'The Daily Miracle' is dedicated to Kazuko, the Kusama of
Kofu

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A Woman With Two Phones

In the middle of the night Irma decides to leave her house to go to the convenience store for night snacks and toilet paper.

At this point, after hours of texting Irma loses her concentration, moving around the apartment like a cockroach in a frying pan, checking her phone, changing clothes, challenging the checkerboard patterned kitchen floor dropping cigarette butts on it.

She stands up from the chair she was sitting at, her two phones lying in front of her, one of the phones lights up with a messages and impatient imagery from an app, Irma looks at the clock, at night she tries to never leave the house at the same hour, but she always ends up hungry and in need for something right around midnight.

She waits for time to change, and then gets her jacket and red gloves.

She slams the door at nighttime as she goes out, a rebellious spirit!

On the way down the stairs Irma's pockets makes a rhythm of bouncing keys, wallet and the phones, in the right side of her jacket; an extra hand sewn pocket, holding a swift blade, the swift blade lies still, waiting to be opened like a gun in a movie.

As she walks out the apartment building she remembers her mother's words to her when she had moved into the city away from her childhood home many years ago, *"Try not to get murdered!"*

Advice she would have given herself would have been; *don't get a boyfriend who always sits at a bar, try not to get addicted to shopping, keep the habit of home cooking and reading intact and wear sneakers to run away from creeps!*

Irma turns a corner and notices him immediately.

This time she didn't see him coming, as she had found a new way to avoid him, he must had found a new way of getting to her.

He is tall and bald, with a soft woman like body shaped as a pear, his bald head shines in the yellow street light like a huge white egg, she could turn around and greet the Egghead with a disgusted look and Egghead would nod back, needy-looking.

She starts walking faster and feels him coming after her.

Even though the streets are empty the shop is crowded at this time at night, everyone is hungry and out to ruin their diet in these intimate hours.

Irma and the Egghead walk into the convenience store, she gets banana bread and toilet paper, the Egghead gets nothing.

Irma goes to the counter, turns and look, Egghead is standing at a shelf with potato chips, staring at her, she sighs and turns to the guy in the counter, a handsome university student, clean-skinned and well-fed.

"I would like a pizza slice and I would like you to call the police, that man over there is following me." She points to the shelf with the potato chips. "That man is following me, and he is every once in a while, its very uncomfortable," she says.

"That bald man standing in the snack area?" the Counter Guy says, confused.

"Yes," Irma replies and looks over at the Egghead; his face has turned red.

The Counter Guy gets his phone from the drawer and says to the Egghead

"You! Come over here, are you following this girl?"

"Woman," Irma says. "I am 28." She laughs and the Counter Guy who looks at her, still confused.

A convenience store, even after midnight is a normalized place where strange behavior is noticed quickly, then immediately ignored. People are getting their coffee and ice cream and try not to follow the situation at the counter obviously.

"Come over here now," The Counter Guy says the to Egghead and the Egghead steps to the counter; he coughs then speaks with a soft voice that makes the Counter Guy turn stiff

"Listen dear sir," says the Egghead "Maybe I am following her."

A moment of complete silence

"How can I explain this without sounding like an idiot, well." Egghead points at Irma

"She, is a woman with two phones, do you understand what I am saying?"

The Counter Guy looks at Irma, then hands her the pizza slice

"Two phones?" he asks the Egghead

"Yes" The Egghead, says

"Two phones, two identities, and you stand face to face with the proper one!" the Egghead looks up and down Irma as he finishes his sentence.

Irma hands some money to the Counter Guy

"You don't have a credit card?" the Counter Guy asks her.

"A woman with two phones I told you" the Egghead says, smiling

"Please just call the police," Irma says and sighs

The Counter Guy stands still for a moment, thinking to himself.

"But, why do you have two phones?" the Counter Guy asks her

Irma takes her change

"Are you goanna call someone for me or not?"

She tries to read the Counter Guy's face, the Counter Guy looks at Irma, then the Egghead takes up two phones from his own pocket then starts calling someone. He shows the two screens to the Counter Guy.

"See for yourself, two phone numbers"

Irma's pockets start ringing, as she hurries to the door, slams it. Then Egghead runs out after her.

A wave of relief passes trough the store, and the atmosphere returns to normal.

Egghead sees Irma escape and hurrying across the parking lot, down a narrow street, she is fast and Egghead is not used to exercise, he groans but finally reaches her speed, "Irma, beautiful, wait" he moans with a small voice. She stops and quickly unbuttons the hand-sewn pocket, opens the swift knife then turn to look Egghead in the eye.

"Don't get near me nameless animal." She says, impressed of the assurance of her own voice.

The Egghead looks hungrily at her.

"Start walking in that direction." Irma points in front of her, "I will stay here."

The Egghead looks at the swift knife for a moment then nods silently and starts to walk away. Irma waits, walks a different path home.

Inside her apartment again, Irma blocks the numbers of two missed calls from the time of the convenience store.

She prepares a bath for herself, eats pizza at the kitchen table as she waits for the water to fill the tub, puts on a face-mask and music.

After her bath Irma wraps herself in a blanket and sits back in the kitchen and starts texting, switching between the two phones, almost operating them at once.

In a photo she is wearing an autumn-red wig, one of the phones has extra memory, she needs as much space as she can get.

Garter

It's pumpkin season, the night turns completely black and the moon white and skinny like a banana freezing its ass off! It's the season of chestnuts.

Lush light bulbs I have hung around the garden glow in the dusk, pears drop, their brown skin rot and moves like glands.

The pears falls from the trees with a broken sound of small innocent voices shouting at me, *Mommy! Mommy! Ripe! Ripe!*

Red and yellow leaves lie everywhere, is the autumn gardens fresh grass. I run around the garden collecting pears, the garden blurred in the darkness while plums crush under my feet.

It drips on the lawn with a sound like thick syrup. The air is cold, warm, wait cold! In the air hangs the smell of our agriculture, organic and hideous!

Our agriculture is practical and disgusting with its home births, butcher blocks, black nails, blood poisoning, blood sausage and raisins.

I wake up early and go to bed early like a child and when I cannot sleep, the devil wakes me up again before he puts on his shoes on (he has left his shoes to heat on the living room stove).

I drink a cup of hot coffee from a green cup and glance at my husband who no longer steals a kiss from me in the dark but instead, is obsessed with our neighbor's teenage daughter.

The hair of this young girl burns like a spirit in his heart. His heart burns, it's clear to me. At nighttime he stands in our leaf-covered garden smoking for several hours, and crawls to bed past midnight.

I stand in the kitchen and spit the ugly flavors of betrayal into the sink. Then I look at my pear trees, they calm me, and I go out to collect them again.

As I work I think of my husband in our sad old car on his way to the city, driving slowly spying on the girls on bikes and making the sight last as long as possible. When he gets home he helps me with the household, he hangs our laundry in the wet garden where it hangs as a flag for all his destructive behavior and never really dries.

I delivery boxes of groceries to the teenage girl's mother, this week it's chestnuts, figs, pumpkin, potato, pears and a piece of pork! I bet the girl hardly eats anything and in secrecy I wish she would walk into a bonfire and burn, or that the birds who eats the seeds from our fields would start eating the skin between the her stockings and skirt.

One afternoon when my husband is out, the girl comes by our house; she leans at the garden fence looking at me with a dumb smile before she asks

"Growing fruit is hard work, isn't it?"

There is sweetness in her voice, compared to my own rusty voice, and my rusty hair, silver-

plated. What's she up to?

"It might be," I say "but I seem strong enough for it." And then, "Don't you have anything better to do with your time, girl? Are you going to stand there looking at me all day?"

The girl runs away, quickly.

There is sweetness in this young girl's hair and in her movements, a calming mood, but right underneath the charm lays Lilith and lure with all her badness and sourness, and to that there is a power similar to the power of agriculture.

There is a power in agriculture, in farming, in my garden that conjures figs and mushroom each year, it is to be trusted. Every morning new figs blush, like purple testicles on little trees.

There is a power in my fingernails; black as the underworld, a power in my eyes that look out at the horizon with the depth of a forest lake.

There is a power in my work-wear with holes and stains in green and brown. In my thick hair like a sky around my face. There is a slight power within my other wardrobe that once bloomed like a flowerbed, a dying one that grows weak, power in my lonely set of party clothes; an apricot shade dress and black leather pumps. The clothes smell like garden and mold, there is no sweetness to those clothes but a slight power.

There is a power in the way I pull out piglets faster and faster when they are born, a power to the way I squeeze the life out of a heavy fig so the juice runs and I lick the scent of a rosehip to allow myself to cry.

There is a power when I whisper the one unspeakable thing to myself; *my love, only 14 years, don't you see that is disgusting?*

At night I lie awake listening to the fruit falling in the garden, I recall a time where there was a sweetness to this bedtime situation, a sweetness from when I lived in the city, I would lay in my bed the same way, safe and warm but unaware of being surrounded by danger.

Bath houses

As we step in we are handed a pair of slim-fitting shoes braided in black plastic, a bunch of towels are hung on our arms.

The woman who works here, a bit commanding, pull our arm to let us know "*Hush, hush!*" and we are led through the dark humid dressing room with red light and elegant wood lockers.

We undress and close the lockers, the keys are placed in brown plastic buckets, and we look ourselves in the mirror, worried and excited by belly fat and almond shaped eyes. I look at myself from every angle until the bath-lady interrupts my posing mirror face with one hard whip on my thigh with a towel, "*Hush, hush!*"

I turn and follow her into the star-shaped Hammam.

The bathhouse is a fantasy, a temple for the body, a gossip club. The floor is made of ceramic tiles in brown and yellow and in the center of the room, a smooth black star shaped table in granite where four ladies are being scrubbed by the savvy hands of the woman working in the Hammam.

Along the walls are sinks and waiting places, aromatic salt with the smell of rosebuds, loud disco music with male voices in falsetto play. Visitors are naked except for bikinis, the braided plastic shoes and their jewelry.

The bath-ladies on the other hand wearing t-shirts and soft shorts, bags with small bottles of oil and gloves, practical clothes and some more sturdy shoes. They tell us to wash, they look and laugh at us, the milky white girls with our blue eyes and thin hair, and we smile back at them, shyly and are lead into the bubble bath.

Here sits a bride and her friends, their breasts long and round like moons or almonds. The eyes of the woman light up with enthusiasm for the story being told. Our eyes light up with curiosity for this other group. We are all checking each other. Ears unfold and listen like sensory horns or spring plants in warm soil.

There is a misconception of the fact that women are most interested in other women, the misconception lies in thinking that the interest is of animosity and not of love.

That being said, we gossip! But the gossip and the whisper is not necessarily a bad thing, actually gossip is a tradition of storytelling, in gossip lies the knowledge of the seen but unspoken, the subtext of history's dirty pockets. Stories that remains unsaid but well kept.

You gossip with your god-sip, the woman who had your back as you gave birth to a child.

And so we panic! We too want to gossip, but what the hell are we going to gossip about? We too want to talk about others and get close to one another in the bath.

It is too much for us and we get up to ask for some cold water to be thrown in our faces. We are then handed a pomegranate slush-ice.

With the red drink in one hand and a commanding whip from the towel we are being led into the steam. In the steam it is slippery, hard to breath, but the body breathes with such softness, popping in the steam like a legume. And finally we start to gossip about men, tricks, we snap and click our tongues when something is right or we are surprised!

Later, no one remember what was said in the steam, but we remember the dense air and the dense conversation.

Out of the steam we are asked to wait around the star-shaped table where woman in bikinis are kneaded like dough. Their big breasts are smashed, stretched and fall to the side. Soon it will be our turn, excited and full of anxiety we wait! Someone tries to skip the line and go in front of us, but a snappy worker puts her into place. This woman must be a regular or, I think, shameless!

On the star table the bath-ladies go at it, press their palm with the oily glove and massage the skin of the visitors in circles. They ask the visitors to get up and sit down on the table, their palms move onto the chest, arms, hips, neck and the face will get a treatment too.

The bath-ladies, they are not in a Hammam: they are at work at a bathing factory.

If you look closely you notice the tiny muscles everywhere on their motherly bodies, muscles that have come from movements such as press, pull and scrub! They place one hand at the side of their hip and pull the visitor's limbs in a perfect stretch. They take a sip of water from a water bottle in their belt bag and dry off the sweat from the forehead with a glove-covered hand. Then back to work again to massage us, the visitors who have paid for the cheapest treatment but still want every bit of our money's worth!

I lie on the back when a woman starts to soak me in oil, she makes a joke with her hands: wriggles my slippery body, back and forward on the table as if I were a big fish. I laugh and make myself heavier.

Squeezed like a lemon, pulled in place: I turn around, lie and think of nothing. My skin falls from my body in thin black threads, I turn to look at my friend who has psoriasis, her skin sticking to her like black snow, falling and sticking, soon the layers of skin are as thick as the gloves and the lady rubbing her gasps and turn to her colleagues *"Look at this, it won't stop!"*

After, we are poured with foam from sponges and I am born again to the soundtrack of Arabic Disco. Remnants of flowers stick to our skin, and I remove some rose petals from my nipple.

I shower, in a small room with blue tiles, the bathhouse's synthetic green shampoo gets in my eyes as I wash my hair, and I walk out, red-eyed into the lounge room with huge croissant-shaped sofas and a big flat screen TV.

My friends are already sitting in the sofa room chatting next to the bride and her friend, they laugh, smoke cigarettes and drink tea, pomegranate slush ice, they eat nuts and candy and put lipstick on, roll their eyes, a bachelorette party. On the side sits their Philippine au pair, a thick grandmother buzzing and joking so everyone laughs.

To me, their language sound harsh and intriguing, their tongue in their mouth are all theirs, like that the language that I speak is all mine. It is a mish-mash of knowledge, emotions, time and things we eat. Even under the influence of others, even under the control of others, the language that enters my ears as a child, comes out of my mouth and disappears is all my own, and theirs are theirs.

Our two groups look each other up and down and just as one of us are about to say something in English, turn and engage in conversation, my friend spills out her drink in a bloodbath of pomegranate slouch-ice between my legs: red all over my white towel!

The liquid on the thick white towel is like Japan's flag, white with a red dot in the middle.

Japan too, like Jordan, has bathhouses.

In Japan you can either go to a Sento or an Onsen, the difference lie in the water: in an Onsen the water is mild and heavy from minerals, in a Sento it is tap-water, but both are worthy of a Saturday.

The Japanese bathhouses suit the big cities tiny apartments with not so much room for a bathroom. And suit the Japanese compassion for health. There is a male and female area and the walls dividing the genders are decorated with tiles or a painting of Fuji-san, the jealous mountain who cursed and defeated her sisters in nature.

But in the Onsen woman aren't fighting each other. Like in the Hammam, there are sorority and sensuousness, of course as well as comparing and display! But it is a space of a different structure that the structure in my everyday life, a structure called "individuality".

I have managed to figure out a perfect model for a day: six glasses of water, work, good lunch and a bath. So when I am in Japan I try to go as much as my time and money allows.

I step into the bathhouse on a warm Tokyo evening in late August with my friend, after a long day of work. I am wearing a cap and a skirt, a blue flimsy shirt and so the owner of the bath house immediately mistakes me for a man, I buy my ticket and am about to enter the woman's dressing room but as I get near the curtain he yells and stands up!

We don't have any common language but then a light get switched on! I grab my banana-like breast laughing,

"Josei!" I say

"I am a woman!"

The bathhouse owner and I laugh apologetically and my careful friend who is much more sensitive to situations shakes his head.

Then we separate, my friend and I, he walks to the left and I to the right, to disappear behind the two signs.

In the dressing room sunburned and marble-white women dress and undress, pitch-black and orange dyed hair. The smell of soap and asses round and as flat as plates, intimate whisper.

I think of my friend who in his love and sensual world enjoys the bodies and minds of men, at the other side of the wall, is he enjoying the sight and situation? How is the atmosphere I wonder, similar? I cannot imagine and care little to know, much too absorbed in what I am about to enter. In my everyday life so many of the rules I follow are made up by myself. But here a strict structure dictates what to do, and I gladly follow.

I undress and place my things in an old wooden locker, so it begins: a small plastic chair and a bucket, my things placed in the bucket, squat down and turn on the blue water, the cold water then the red water, the hot water and pour it over my head, throw it!

We women, sit at a long row repeating this movement, each in front of a mirror and two taps (red and blue) Once I by accident took a 100 year old woman's chair, I didn't know the rules and I have never since felt that embarrassed.

Around me women are already lying in the hot pools, some falling asleep; some wearing a ghostly paper-mask with clay or sake yeast. I go in.

Ah. Warmth.

As I step in not only my skin but also my organs, muscles and stress are treated. As if a spirit, or the other visitors were whispering to me "*we got you*"

Water overwhelms me with sadness, it dissolves me and I am addicted to it.

I repeat this, clean myself with red and blue tap water and sink into the hot minerals cold and hot and almost boiling. I bump into a knee, a smile is served from a dumpling-like round woman with a wry grin, and two young girls in the cold bath give me a long skeptical inspection. As I expose myself from different temperatures I feel more and more blank as if my personality gets dissolved.

Death?

When I am done, I hang my towel on my arm, Japanese towels are so light you can hang them on something and they will catch the wind, flapping gently and before you know it they are dry.

I go out to get dressed, wipe, cream, weigh, then use a hair dryer and get a snack: milk.

The ritual of drinking milk after Onsen, developed in Japan over fifty years ago, when the majority were using these facilities instead of home baths, but why milk? Something tells me it's not only a purpose of rehydration, did a milk company sponsor these small fridges?

I step out to have cold milk, my friend who has an allergy doesn't, a Japanese tradition for milk with the taste of chocolate or vanilla, strawberry and coffee. Milk is the bridge to my own origin of bathhouses, Denmark, a land of milk products, milky white girls and Danish bread, charred the color of midnight and heavy as granite.

At home, we also have bathhouses but mostly we have public swimming pools, for exercise. The pools in Denmark tell the story of welfare, socialism, but also petit bourgeois.

They are often build around sport stadiums, decorated with casts of Greek sculptures or tile paintings in green and white of soft bellies woman with strong arms enjoying the water or athletic alike men with flat bodies and striped hot pants, ready for a refreshing dip before getting back to work!

The pools are operated by people in sport clothes, and owned by the government, clubs or associations.

Some summers ago my siren sister and me both fell in love with a red-haired boy from Iceland, he played us out, she snatched him, and he choose her.

I felt hurt like a lioness with a thorn in my paw. Eventually he dumped her and we escaped the awkwardness of the situation. But we kept one thing from this boy; his being froze in the winter and while living in Denmark he went to the pools just to lay in warm water.

So my siren sister and I, we decided to make a swim club together.

A place for curing depression in our country's cruel winter, encouraging each other to show up and take long baths together, for it is so easy to love alone.

The Daily Miracle

Whoever said money couldn't buy happiness simply didn't know where to go shopping. For breakfast she knew exactly where to buy happiness in its purest form: bread.

All week she went to the bakery at 8:00 to get them something delicious to chew on before painting, all week except on Sundays where she woke up early in order to do nothing.

We can call her Marie or something like Aia, the name of someone famous, to bring her some luck for her artist career.

Aia wakes up and puts on work clothes and shoes, walks out the door, since the day at the teacher's house will be filled with silence she is listening to loud music in her headphones as she walks through the city waking up.

The Convenience store parking lot is filled with cars getting coffee, construction workers who have been up since 6 tearing up some asphalt: they are building something new.

She passes a bridge and stops for a moment, a big orange fish moves near the seaweed bushes on the waters edge. A black turtle sits on a stone, enjoying the morning sun. Aia turns her head and look to the other side of the bridge where white cranes are bathing, On the bridge cars rush in the early morning traffic and fill the city with white noise, she paints these calm animals and fast cars, beings of the morning a few meters from each other divided by a concrete platform but in completely other mindsets and tempo.

She continues her walk to the bakery, a small wooden shop that always sells out early, she gets sausage bread rolls and melon bread; two of each. She pays for the bread and her money changes pocket. Money is always there but the pockets change; that is all there is to say about money.

The easy-looking woman working in the bakery hands her the back of bread and sends her a warm smile and plants a thought in Aia: In the beginning the teacher had told her *"The best thing for me is to have the daily miracle, and it does come"* Aia wondered if the bag in her hand was holding the baker's daily miracle.

She walks to the teacher's house in the outskirts of the city, across the train station and along the tracks, then up a hill with suburban houses till she gets to the mountain forest where she climbs 446 wooden stairs and cross a bushy area, carefully, arms in front to protect her from getting spiders in her eyes, then steps into the garden of the teacher's house.

How can I describe the teacher's garden, and the house, my god! Have you ever visited the house of a painter or a writer, maybe the house of someone working in craft or making sculptures out of trash?

It's not necessarily clean, nor is it easy to move around inside or outside for that matter, its qualities lie the fact that it is filled with things and painted in gorgeous colors. The qualities lie in the secrecy of the location, its collections, hidden letters, souvenir filled suitcases from long travels, half and whole finished work. It lies in the time of each painting; that time sits in the

smoky wallpaper like blessed dust; it doesn't rely on status, young wives and designer furniture.

For instance outside stands a row of sculptures, all made out of a few instruments, some support and pretty air: each a daily miracle.

The atelier has grown out of proportions. The bath in the garden has been overtaken as storage for some useful broken ceramics that are going to be made into a mosaic one of these days, so the teacher hasn't showered for some weeks.

The only space left not for working but for all the secondary living is the toilet and sink which is squeezed in between stacks of books and magazines, the bed you climb into from the hall and the kitchen that has two free spaces: two seats on a kitchen bench lined with wool and a small table with room for two plates and teacups, and a clean empty area near the gas stove, sink and kitchen desk to arrange food and tea on a lacquer tray.

Aia makes tea at the gas stove and arranges the bread on the lacquer tray. The teacher comes out of the bedroom and sits down at the kitchen bench waiting for Aia to serve them breakfast.

The two women have sausage rolls and melon bread and strong black tea before working, they don't talk much, since the teacher is a little grumpy in the morning. On afternoons she can't stop speaking. The teacher reaches for the bakery's plastic bag.

"This one is always too cute!" the teacher says "It even has a little face on it."

She reaches for a notepad on the kitchen sink and paints the face of the smiley logo with one hand rubbing the plastic bag with the other.

"You know I appreciate cute, but not so much the plastic that comes with it" she finishes the drawing, slurping the last of her tea. "Now, let's begin"

They move into the atelier, or the place where the aprons hang and teacher's favorite desk are. They put on aprons and the teacher chooses two thin brushes, a checkerboard apron and two colors from the paint stand: red and midnight blue. Carefully she takes out a single paper sheet, thin, almost invisible. The two women hold their breath as the paper lands on the clean, green desk.

"Just one at a time," she tells Aia "You never know"

The teacher dips the brush in the red and starts painting, beginning from the left corner, contouring. She paints a landscape of women melting. Glowing red nipples, then she dips the brush in midnight blue paint: handholding, gymnastics and dinner being served, small animals and flowers on dresses, revealed underwear, a fight. On the walls hang similar drawings and paintings, some by herself, some from friends or thrift stores.

The teacher dips it in red again and paint red mouths, then she takes a pencil and paint eyebrows and eyes, finally she makes the background, growing and taking over the motif, Aia is not sure, but when the background is finished she is certain: *the daily miracle*.

"That's it," the teacher says

“There we have it, it does always come early doesn’t it? You can go home now sweetie” the teachers wrinkled, brown-eyed face looks serious then cracks into laughter
“No, I’m kidding, please, hand me two more sheets”