

## The Imbalance That Saved Tatsuki

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Winter's end brought the promise of spring and the gift of life to the Yakashita family.

The countryside was free of snow, soon to be decorated with florets and lightened with the gay music of birds. The weather was fickle, yet perfectly inviting for a new baby. As flowers prepared to bloom, they awaited their turn to shine amidst the lush green countryside. Vibrant hydrangeas, delicate chrysanthemums, and fragrant plum blossoms would soon join the lively display of roses, peonies, and tulips. Amidst the sea of color, pink carnations, marigolds, camellias, and hibiscus flowers would catch the eye, each vying for attention among the many dazzling blooms.

Born on a vibrant Wednesday morning to Kayoko and Tomohiro Yakashita, Tatsuki Yakashita came into the world accompanied by the sweet song of the bush warbler. In that moment, a warm golden light seemed to embrace the house, as if welcoming her arrival. She exuded radiant beauty with her striking dragon-like eyes and soft wisps of dark hair on her head. Many would say that she was the most beautiful child that they'd ever seen, but her beauty went unnoticed by those whose eyes mattered the most.

If not for her chronically ill sister, perhaps Tatsuki's parents would have treated her like their daughter, too.

She was minuscule in her parents' eyes, and that was what shoved

her down the path of wrongdoing. She was desperate for any form of attention. She watched her sister get showered with affection, only to be shoved aside like she didn't matter.

Could you imagine what that does to a kid?

Nanami, Tatsuki's older sister, was always the promising one. Their parents yearned for wealth and to live in splendor. With a gift as precious as Nanami, they were certain they'd get what they wanted in no time.

Tatsuki was never a candidate for them. She was too *Tatsuki*—too *herself*, and when the realization set upon her as a teen, it buried her deeper beneath the heated sand of insecurities. Nanami was perfect. She'd been guaranteed a husband before she was born, and their parents' main focus was nursing her to health before she had to be sent off for marriage.

The Yakashitas pre-devoted thirteen years to Nanami before she was born, yet they dared to bring another child into the world? They prayed at Nanami's bedside every night, begging God to lift the curse he had bestowed upon their darling child. She was their savior. Their claim to riches and fame.

They cried out, "If not Nanami, then who?" because certainly Tatsuki wasn't their ticket to success. She didn't have a suitor. No one begged for her hand like they did Nanami's. They didn't need her, and they certainly didn't have the patience for another body in their home, so when Tatsuki was old enough to begin school, she was sent to Nagoya, forced to live with her alcoholic uncle, who was never home if his eyes were open.

Tatsuki was perched on the windowsill, plucking at the threads of her skirt and wishing for freshly squeezed orange juice. To her, orange juice was more than a simple drink; it was a feeling that she hadn't experienced in a while. It was like finally finding the perfect flowers to fill up vases with—something that seemed impossible until it wasn't.

From her spot, Tatsuki could see the silhouette of buildings in the distance. She knew they were different from the ones on her side of town—luxurious apartments with marble flooring and big windows that allowed sunlight to pour through them. They probably had their own washing machines and dryers, and Tatsuki would have bet that each apartment had a gold chandelier.

The shabby apartment that she sat in couldn't have been more dif-

ferent: water dripping from old pipes, furniture drenched in shadows, and cobwebs stretching across every corner of each room. There was a lack of color in the apartment. The yellow walls of her bedroom were water-stained from leaks, and her bedding was a dingy brown instead of its original purple.

For once, Tatsuki wanted to venture to the other side of the city. She wasn't greedy, and she wouldn't have gone overboard. She'd have basked in the glory of sleeping in a clean, quiet space for once. She wanted to sleep in a real bed again, one that had a real bedframe, not one supported with cinderblocks and wooden pallets. She would appreciate every second of it if she had the opportunity, and she would wash it down with a nice glass of orange juice.

The sound of voices filled the air and shaped the city outside of her window. Tatsuki scooted closer to the edge, curiously minding the business of the wind. Voices yelling at one another, music playing on speakers, and cars honking their horns as they drove by all blended together into an urban symphony that spoke louder than words ever could. Tatsuki listened carefully to these sounds, as if trying to decipher what secrets they held within them. Nature too had its own voice—vines snaking up walls, flowers blooming against concrete barriers—bringing life where there once was none.

Finally, amidst all these noises, came a gentle hum—sweet and innocent like freshly squeezed orange juice spilling over lips—promising hope for days yet to come even when everything else felt lost. It was the most calming music ever, something Tatsuki wasn't used to.

Her uncle was a hard-rocker who played heavy metal. If not drunk on the couch, he could be found hunkered over his laptop with drool spilling over his keyboard, blasting Seikima-II.

"It's Blossom Dearie!" a voice called. "And you're going to be late for school."

Tatsuki rushed from the window and straightened her skirt. She pulled her rucksack over her shoulders and skipped out of the apartment. Again, like always, her nosy neighbor was the one to remind her to head out for school. She was the one to tell Tatsuki to stop once she reached the ground floor to brush the cat hair from her uniform.

Her name was Joyce Perry, and she was an international student at Nagoya University of the Arts. Tatsuki was infatuated with her and want-

ed to be just like her. She was beautiful, tall, and slender, and everyone seemed to love her—including Tatsuki.

“What did I say about messing with stray cats, Suki?”

“You said don’t do it,” Tatsuki muttered.

“No,” Joyce said, shaking her head. “I said be careful. Everyone and everything deserves love, some just from afar.”

Tatsuki’s mind moved a mile a minute, even faster than her eyes, which tried to take in everything around her at once.

There was a new boutique with bright lights surrounding its door, daring people to take a peek inside. Two high school girls sashayed in with their bags secure on their arms, and an older woman followed suit soon after.

*It’s busy,* Tatsuki concluded.

The bag lady wasn’t carrying as many bags as usual, and her step was unbalanced.

*She got hurt . . .*

A woman with a briefcase was holding the hand of a small boy with an oak-leather rucksack twice his size, scurrying across the street with her eyes glued to her watch. The clicking of her heels as she got further away was muted by horns honking and cars passing, shaking Tatsuki from her short-lived reverie.

She felt out of place in the bustling metropolis. Born in a rural part of Kyoto Prefecture and briefly raised in a villa surrounded by a lake and garden, Tatsuki felt significantly different here in Nagoya. It was not a place for a little girl like Tatsuki to be all alone. Maybe other kids would have been able to make it to school and back home safely, but everyone knew that there was only a matter of time before Tatsuki fell into the arms of peril.

She was far too fascinated with the little things around her to pay attention to the bigger things.

Tatsuki stood at the intersection, her eyes fixed on the traffic light. She was eager to cross the road, but it seemed like an eternity as she waited for the signal to change. Glancing at her watch, she furrowed her brows as it ticked three times.

*Tick, tick, tick.*

But still, the light remained stubbornly green. No transition to yellow, no flash of red, just a never-ending green.

*It is a pretty color, though.*

Tatsuki blinked, looking down at her rain boots. It reminded her of the green on her socks. The same socks with the bright, funky pattern that were hidden beneath her shiny boots. She was not supposed to wear her funky socks to school, but her mother was not around to remind her. Not even Joyce could remind her, as she was barely accustomed to general rules in Japan, let alone Tatsuki's school sock requirement.

So, Tatsuki wore the socks to school and prepared to receive her second strike.

She huffed and kicked her foot out, annoyed that she'd forgotten to wear her white socks again. If the light hadn't finally changed and she wasn't signalled to cross, she would have turned around and gone home. She didn't want to go to school anymore. Not when she'd screwed up *again*.

Tatsuki had been embarrassing herself at school a lot that month. She had already been yelled at for wearing the wrong socks twice. The second time, she wasn't allowed to attend any of her classes until she had on the proper socks. So, she had to walk back home to change socks, and her classmates laughed at her.

It didn't end there. Since she missed most of her classes, she was singled out the next day. She had to stand in front of the class and answer a plethora of questions spat at her by her classmates—mostly math problems—that they knew she couldn't answer. She managed to troop through most of them, not caring if she were right or wrong, but the last question brought forth an insecurity that had yet to fully reach the surface.

The question was, "What color do you associate with yourself?"

It was a weird question to ask in a math class, Tatsuki thought. She had a feeling she was being made fun of simply for existing, and she didn't want to answer it. She didn't really know how, and she was ashamed. She could come up with a color for everyone she knew. Her mother was a deep navy blue, like the depths of an ocean—cold and uninviting. She never felt any warmth or love from her mother, only bitterness and resentment that hung in the air like a fog.

Nanami had been sickly since birth, always struggling against something unseen but very real. Tatsuki often thought of her sister as a pale shade of green, one that blended into the background without making much noise or fuss. The same way her sister lived in their home when she

was still there—quiet and out of sight as much as possible so not to cause too much trouble.

And then there was her father. He was bright red, just like his temper, which could flare up at any moment without warning. He would yell and scream until everyone around him cowered away from him, afraid to be on the receiving end of his wrath again. But despite all this, Tatsuki still loved him deeply, even though he wasn't always able to show it back in return due to his own inner demons that plagued him day after day.

He was the first man she ever gave the benefit of the doubt.

As it came time for Tatsuki to share the color that she felt best represented herself, she hesitated before finally uttering "gray." Her words were met with confusion from those around her, as they had all chosen vibrant and lively colors. But Tatsuki couldn't bring herself to explain her choice. To them, gray may have seemed dull and lifeless, but to Tatsuki, it held a deeper meaning. It symbolized how she viewed herself—existing without leaving a trace of color in the world, yet still present in every situation, big or small.

She couldn't help but long for a touch of pink, a symbol of love and acceptance from her family. Perhaps then she would be able to find her true colors. But they never offered it, leaving her feeling invisible and unnoticed. Despite shining brightly everywhere else, her own home—the one she was shunned from—was the one place she wanted to truly matter.

*Ah, but home is a place I cannot be, she sighed before smiling. Not right now, at least.*

As a child, she held on to the hope of being welcomed back home. But as she grew older, she came to understand the difference between dreaming as a child and as an adult. While adults dream of things that are achievable, children often wish for the impossible.

Tatsuki shook her head, trying her best to rid herself of all thoughts. No more colors, and no more sulking over bad days. Whether she was about to walk headfirst into embarrassment or not, Tatsuki just wanted to get the day over with. With a newfound sense of confidence and excitement, she skipped happily down the street, determined to have a better day than the last.

As she got closer to her school building, Tatsuki smiled and showed off her new and carefully styled hair. Her bangs were perfectly curled, with

two blue clips holding them in place. She felt so pretty, and she longed for her parents to see her like that. As soon as school was over, she would visit them. She decided with a squeal.

Her excitement increased as she saw two cats curled up together on the other side of the road. Quickening her pace, Tatsuki squatted down and kissed the back of her teeth as she gently petted the pretty black feline. The cat purred contentedly, encouraging Tatsuki to take it home with her. But she knew she couldn't, so she bid the cat goodbye and headed towards her school. The wind picked up, blowing petals into the air and creating a beautiful dance as they twirled towards the nearby building.

Lost in her thoughts and the wind's performance of Swan Lake, Tatsuki suddenly remembered that she was supposed to be going to school. She broke into a sprint, kicking up water from the puddles as she ran. Finally arriving at the gates, she turned to look back at the cats, hoping they would still be there when school was

It was going to be a good day. She was going to be forgiven for her socks, and she wasn't going to be poked at in front of her classmates.

Tatsuki followed Mr. Hagashi back to the empty classroom, giggling softly as he ducked beneath the door frame to enter. Her smile immediately faltered as she remembered that she had just gotten scolded and was in trouble. She sighed and sat on the floor ahead of him, folding her legs beside her and straightening her skirt.

The air blew against her skin, sending chills down her spine. The sound of her classmates playing outside tickled her ears. She wished to be out there with them, running around, giggling, passing around sweet treats that they'd snuck in, and telling silly stories. She wondered what she'd done so badly that made not only her family but her peers at school do away with her presence. She couldn't tell if she was born to be disliked or if she'd unintentionally done something to make them feel that way about her—but she constantly thought about it.

Mr. Hagashi finally sat down and looked at Tatsuki, noticing the way her eyes immediately jumped from his.

She was nervous in his presence, finding herself interested in everything but him. Suddenly, the loose strands on her skirt were fascinating, and the coils of her bangs were the most suitable for glasses, so she used them to cover her eyes.

Mr. Hagashi had always been Tatsuki's favorite teacher. He was joyful

and easygoing, and she believed he had the beauty of a prince. He stood out from the rest of the teachers. Despite the fact that they were a mix of men and women who were either short and stocky or tall and thin, hardly any of them reached his height, and none of the men had enough bulk to beat Mr. Hagashi in an arm-wrestling match, either.

His visage was extremely distinct, dominated by his mother's western genes. It made the school's younger girls shriek with delight, which flattered him, to say the least. He was polite, but cocky. His attractiveness blinded young and old ladies, and he enjoyed the attention.

Until he noticed Tatsuki, that is.

He did not like how she didn't pay attention to him or anyone else. She was quiet, almost too quiet, and she constantly seemed to get herself into trouble.

However, Tatsuki did notice him. She noticed him, and she noticed how everyone else seemed to have at least one person they could smile at, except for her. She did not want to make it a habit of being caught staring at another with a look of loath, so she diverted her attention elsewhere every time.

"You know, Tatsuki, white socks are the rule, and this is the third time that I've had to remind you." Mr. Hagashi lectured softly.

Tatsuki sat crisscrossed on the floor before him, her uniform crisp and pristine. Her hair was wrapped in two braids, and her face was crumb-free. The only abnormality came from her bold socks, with a purple-colored paisley print standing out.

"However, I'll overlook it because they're quite lovely. You should wear these just for me because paisley print is my favorite."

"Okay..." Her voice was hushed, and her thoughts were hazy. She was perplexed. How could she wear them solely for him if she couldn't wear them to school? Why would she do that anyway? It didn't seem normal—besides, they were just socks. Nothing special.

"Take your legs out from under you," he politely said. "And please hand over your foot."

Tatsuki carefully uncurled her legs and stretched her left leg, quivering slightly when the man took her foot. Her father struck her in the face with such force that she bled the last time she broke a rule. She expected Mr. Hagashi to smack her for wearing the wrong socks, but she was taken aback by his gentle actions. She couldn't believe it. Was this the same



man who had yelled at her just moments ago, in front of her classmates, for wearing the wrong socks? She couldn't help but feel confused and a little frightened by his sudden change in demeanor. But as he continued to carefully adjust her socks, she couldn't deny the unexpected kindness in his actions.

He gingerly pulled the violet fabric from her skin and lightly caressed her foot before replacing it with a pristine white sock. He gestured for her next foot, then grabbed her hand and pulled her to his lap after repeating his previous action.

Tatsuki did not feel comfortable in the unwelcoming seat. She did not know much, but she could feel that his actions were not right. She tried to free herself from his hold, muttering "Stop" before his soft words halted her movements.

"Come on, Suka," said the teacher. "I'm doing it because I care about you." He smiled, well aware of the girl's plight at home. She was clearly ignored. Her hair was sustained and her clothes were neat, but her mind was on the verge of destruction, and it emanated from her parents' abandonment.

The very parents that were alive and present.

"You do?" she asked.

"Of course I do. Do you hear the pretty little nickname that I gave you, Suka? I don't award nicknames to just anyone, you know."

"S-so, I'm special?"

"You are, indeed, a very unique girl. I think about you all day when I get home. Do you love me too?" he asked as his hands trailed to the front of her blouse, peeling the buttons open.

She did not know if she loved him because she did not know what it felt like, but he said he loved her, and she believed in fairness. So, she nodded.

"And when two people love each other, they touch each other. Have you ever seen your mommy and daddy touch each other?"

"Y-yes . . ." Tatsuki replied. "And they touch Nanami too, but never me."

"That isn't right, my angel. If they don't love you, it's up to me to do so." He kissed her hair and inhaled the bubblegum aroma that arose from it. "You have to give me permission. If you don't unwrap your arms, you may never feel love. Suka, I want to adore you."

His words were sweet like caramel and had just the right amount of

sugar to lure a gullible girl. Tatsuki was stuck in his goop of lies, but she was young and impressionable, with no leading figure in her life to warn her of the strange man who came bearing candy. She stretched her arms and let her shirt fall to the floor, believing every word that came out of his mouth.

His hands were soft as they roamed her shoulders, leaving spurs of goosebumps behind. He was gentle, his actions matching his words and giving Tatsuki no reason to doubt him.

She never experienced something so soft, and she never felt so loved.

*Is this how Mom and Dad treat Nanami when I'm not home? Is this love? Is it true that love is touch?*

*Like how Dad touches Mom and Nanami but does not touch me . . . Then, Mr. Hagashi really loves me!*

A sudden gasp erupted in the room, sending Tatsuki to the floor. Mr. Hagashi stood to his feet and fixed his shirt before shifting on one foot, his eyes darting over to Tatsuki for the shortest second. He had been caught in a bad position, and the only way out of it was to run. Tatsuki watched as he scampered through the door, shoving the school's counselor out of the way. Tears welled in her eyes once he disappeared, taking with him the love he'd promised her. And for the nth-teenth time, she was all on her own.

She was so close to experiencing love for the first time.

"Tatsuki, are you okay?" Mrs. Kagiya asked, crouching in front of her with her shirt in her hand. "What did he do?"

"He loved me," she spat. "And now he is gone."

"Oh, Tatsuki, that is *not* love."

"It is!" Tatsuki shook her head. "And now he is gone!"

Within a few seconds, Tatsuki was gone too. Her feet had carried her out of the door and after Mr. Hagashi. The only things she left behind were her discarded floral socks and tiny droplets of tears.

That was the last day Tatsuki was seen in Nagoya, and for the rest of her youth, she would be desperately searching for something she wouldn't be able to pinpoint once received—because she didn't know what it was.

Love.

**Cadence Gray** is a sophomore studying criminal justice and a dedicated writer. Her love for writing has been a lifelong passion, and she is excited to continue exploring this passion through her studies and personal projects. In her free time, Cadence can be found curled up with her cat, a cozy mug of tea, and a good book. Constantly seeking new writing opportunities and challenges, she aspires to make a positive impact through her words and storytelling.