

## Chapter 3: Takasu Yasuko

**H**aruko, Mitsuko and Katsuko were all snuggled under their blankets. The outside was certainly black, with only the light from the lamp posts sprinkled along the streets, which were certainly lonely, as only the sound of crickets could reach one's ears. It was certainly late; three hours until midnight was what the digital clock told them.

And yet, the lights in their room stayed on. Their big, doll-like eyes cheekily remained open. The three little girls peeked over their covers with mischievous smiles. They fidgeted with their feet, the little bumps under the blanket moving left and right jauntily. Then, when they heard the thumps of footsteps moving up the staircase outside, they giggled. Whoever was walking up the stairs had stopped just in front of their bedroom door.

Suddenly, the door swung open.

"Ya-hooooo! Never fear, Ya-chan is here!" Takasu Yasuko cheered. The lively, blonde grandmother in her 40s waved her hand over her head with a big, open smile for her grand introduction. The girls giggled incessantly before pulling their blankets off to show her their bright little faces.

Yasuko gracefully sauntered across the room to Mitsuko's bedside. She pushed the hair over the little girl's forehead and gave it a long, deep kiss. *Chu!* When she pulled her lips away, Mitsuko happily receded into her blanket like a pond turtle. Then, Yasuko moved to her right, to Haruko's bedside. *Chu!* Haruko kicked her feet and widened her smile. Finally, Yasuko went around Haruko's bed to Katsuko's bedside, who started wiggling about when she knew it was her turn. She raised her head to take in the kiss. *Chu!*

"Why was I the last one? I'm the one closest to the door!" Katsuko said as Yasuko walked to the door.

"Then I'll kiss you first tomorrow, Kacchan," Yasuko responded gently.

"When can I be first? I'm always second..." Haruko asked.

"Well, I'll just go in the order I think is right. But whether you're first or last, Ya-chan's kisses are all the same, okay?" Yasuko rested her finger on the light switch. "Good night, girls! Rest well!"

"Good night, Ya-chan!" The girls said in unison before Yasuko cut the lights, sending the girls into the comforting embrace of the darkness. She gave them a little wave before closing the door behind her.

Outside her granddaughters' bedroom, on the second floor of the house, she turned to the door at the very end of the railing separating it and the staircase on her right. She gently turned the knob and pushed the door open to what used to be her room. However, it was now occupied by someone else.

"Hey!" Yasuko said softly. In front of her, a little boy laid under the covers. The light in his room was already off. Yasuko's shadow casted onto the floor with the light behind her. The boy only squinted when the light from outside reached his eyes. It seemed he was already on his way to dreamland. Yasuko strolled to his bedside. *Chu!*

"Good night, Yuuchi."

There wasn't a child in the world that could refuse Yasuko's love. A little smile bloomed on Yuuchi's face like the cherry blossoms in spring. She gently closed the door behind her in the hopes her grandson would fall asleep quickly.

When she was outside, she was greeted by Taiga, her young daughter-in-law, who wore nothing but a bathrobe. They didn't utter a word to each other. Taiga simply nudged her head towards her son's door. Yasuko cheekily placed her finger in front of her mouth and winked while she shushed.

That night, the two women stood in another bedroom, working together to cover one of the walls with a layer of soft, spiky, black panels. Once the wall was completely covered, they stood back to look at their work.

"This should be enough to block out the sound of the washing machine," Taiga said. "You won't need to worry about your rest getting disturbed anymore."

"Thank you, Taiga-chan," Yasuko said before planting her butt on her bedside. She sighed. "We better start sipping our tea before they get cold." At her feet was a mini coffee table with two steaming cups of apple tea resting atop of it. The two women picked up their cups and faced the black spiky wall while sitting on the bed.

What used to be the Takasu household's garage was turned into a laundry room and storage space for the family since Taiga and Ryuuji never planned on getting a car. However, that storage space would later be walled up into a fourth bedroom after Taiga got pregnant again. More space was needed to accommodate the new arrival.

"Ryuuji would probably scold us for drinking in here," Taiga said before taking a sip.

"Well, he won't know with this soundproofing. Hehe~" Yasuko cheekily swung her little cup around.

"I'm still not sure why we put off the soundproofing for so long... So how's this room been for you? It's been some time since you left the second floor."

“It’s still comfortable... Well, I only realised later on that it does get a bit lonely down here. How’re the girls going to come to me when they get nightmares if they’re too afraid to even come down at night?” Yasuko said as she felt the fabric of her covers with her hand.

“Ya-chan, they’re too old for that.”

“Hehe... You never know!”

The two women took long sips from their cups. Taiga’s eyes shamefully drifted away from her cheery mother-in-law.

“Sorry for moving you out of your old room. It must’ve been quite troublesome.”

“It’s alright. Old room, guest room, what’s the difference? It’s far better than before we moved here. I even have sunlight coming into my room, can you believe that? Besides, I wouldn’t want to get in the way if you want to watch over Yuuchi, either.”

“It’s a good thing we got this garage walled up, huh?”

“Yeah. Another bedroom sure was a great idea...” A funny thought sprung into Yasuko’s mind, making her eyes light up. “Oh, but you know, Taiga-chan, I think the time for me to move in with my parents might be approaching.”

“Why’s that?”

“To make room for a fifth child, of course!”

Taiga jolted where she sat when the words ‘fifth child’ reached her ears. “Huh!? No way! Why would I—”

“Oh, come on, Taiga-chan! You know it’ll happen eventually!” Yasuko leaned in. Her fingers crept up Taiga’s arm like a spider. Taiga’s shoulders shivered like jelly. “One day, you and Ryuu-chan will get excited... It could happen on purpose, or it could be by accident, but I know what you’d choose after. You haven’t gotten over the lovely feeling of Ryuu-chan pampering you, hm?”

Taiga swiped Yasuko’s hand away, her face as red as a rose and her shoulders. The back of her head faced her mother-in-law. “Stop, stop! Ryuuji promised we’d be careful, alright? We’ve already got our hands full with four kids!”

Yasuko leaned in again and whispered in Taiga’s ear like a seductress. “That’s what you said when you had three...”

For a moment, Taiga considered the scenario. Her eyes relaxed as if she were thinking, *What if I did have another?* But she quickly shut her eyes and shook her head as she snapped herself out of it. She grabbed Yasuko’s shoulder and gently shoved her away.

“Whatever! Don’t give me any ideas!”

“Hehe...” Yasuko chuckled.

Only time would tell.

“Well, I really am thinking of moving in with my parents though. I was thinking it would be easier to plan my trips if I actually lived with them,” Yasuko said as her fingers danced around the rim of the cup.

Ever since Yasuko and her parents reunited, the little family had been going on all sorts of overseas trips to make up for lost time. While their relationship started out quite rocky, everything seemed to smooth out when Yasuko visited them one day and confidently said, “Let’s go on vacation together!” They made many memories together, from speaking broken English in the streets of London to swimming in the glistening beach waters of Krabi. Travelling the world became the very thing they needed to bring themselves together.

“Where are you going next?” Taiga asked.

“Mmh... I’m still having trouble deciding...” Yasuko said as she looked down and placed her finger on her chin. As she pondered, her eyes met a little trinket shining from one of her drawers in the corner of her room.

“Oh!” Yasuko scuttled to the item that caught her eye. She opened the drawer and pulled out a metallic souvenir that stood on her palm. It formed the shape of two tall corn-shaped towers standing next to each other. “Aah! I’ve been looking for this little thing! It was from one of my most favourite trips with my parents!”

“That? I found it while we were moving everything down.”

Yasuko rubbed the souvenir against her puffy cheek. “Thank you so much, Taiga-chan! Hey, you know where I got this?”

“You’ve gone all over the place. There’s no way I’d know,” Taiga chuckled.

“Kuala Lumpur! Oh, the evening view from the top of the twin towers was just exquisite! The waterpark at Sunway Lagoon was amazing too, even though my parents didn’t move around that much... The Batu Caves had some beautiful sights too... I have to show you the pictures, Taiga-chan!”

Yasuko quickly sat beside her daughter-in-law and pulled out her phone. She scrolled through all her photos then tilted her screen so Taiga could see. Her eyes suddenly lit up.

“Wait, is that... A monkey stealing your dad’s sunhat!?” Taiga giggled.

“Yeah, crazy, right? Oh, but that wasn’t the only time a wild animal came up to us!” Yasuko continued scrolling through her photos. While she was searching for more animal pictures, Taiga looked at her with a warm smile.

“Did your parents ever bring you on vacation when you were a kid?” She asked.

“They did. But it’s not as easy as it is today, with the Internet and whatnot.”

“Going on all these trips must make you feel quite nostalgic.”

“Yeah...” Yasuko looked at Taiga. “Like before I had Ryuuji...” She greeted her with the same smile Taiga was giving. “You know, I don’t think I ever properly thanked you and Ryuuji for bringing my parents and I together.”

“Ya-chan, that happened years ago.”

“I know, but...” Yasuko breathed a little sigh of relief as she looked at her phone. “If it weren’t for you two, I didn’t think I’d ever get to feel what it was like to be close to my parents again.” The screen displayed a photo of her and her parents smiling joyfully underneath the Petronas Twin Towers, its light illuminating the night sky. “Raising Ryuuji was such a scary time. I only had myself to rely on, and I couldn’t turn to my parents for help. I really missed having them around to tell me what to do.”

She turned to her daughter-in-law with confident eyes. “Now, when we’re planning our vacations and going overseas together, it’s like I never left their side to begin with!” But her confidence faded when she came to a realisation. “Well, I can’t pretend that those sixteen years of absence never happened. Right now, that’s longer than the time I’ve been with them after I returned.” She pumped her fists. “So I’m going to savour this feeling as much as I can! I want to be with them for the rest of my life!”

Hearing Yasuko’s words gave Taiga a warm feeling in her chest. Her smile was soft. She put down her cup of tea and rested her hands behind her on the bed. “Ryuuji and I always wanted to bring everyone in this family happiness. It feels great to see that our efforts have actually paid off.”

Yasuko’s grin stretched further. “Ooh! I’m so glad you’re my daughter!~” She said as she excitedly hopped where she sat. “Come here!” She opened her arms wide.

Taiga’s eyes widened when Yasuko suddenly pounced at her and trapped her in an embrace. The two women fell to the bed and started rolling around. “T-too much! This is too much hugging!” Taiga complained and struggled while the side of her face was smothered by Yasuko’s pillowy chest.

“Come on, Taiga! Just let yourself get buried in it!”

“Gyaaaaah!”

The gentle late afternoon sun shone through the curtains of the Takasu household’s guest bedroom (or, what is now known as Yasuko’s bedroom). Yasuko laid in bed like a dead cockroach, her limbs bent and stretched everywhere, her blanket only covering half her body.

Drool dripped down her neck while her droning snores overpowered the harmonious singing of the birds outside.

Suddenly, a shrill beep would cause her to jolt up from her bed.

“Ah... I need to get ready...” She murmured. Once she stepped outside of her room, she stretched once more and yawned over the intense rumbling of the washing machine.

After taking a warm shower and donning her professional work uniform, she sat at the dinner table to help herself to her afternoon meal. Haruko and Katsuko were sitting in front of the TV and seemed to be doing their homework on the coffee table. An episode of Demon Slayer was airing and Katsuko’s eyes were glued to the screen, but it almost looked like she was being productive. Mitsuko, however, was doing her homework next to Yasuko.

“And then, when Shirai-sensei and Osada-sensei were alone, Shirai-sensei asked him to hold her hand, and then he did! Even though they told everyone that they weren’t in love!” Mitsuko blabbered.

“Oh my! Juicy secrets! Shirai-sensei doesn’t sound like a very secretive woman,” Yasuko said to Mitsuko with one of her cheeks filled with rice.

“And then, the next day, I followed them secretly again! Osada-sensei looked around, but he didn’t see me. And then, he kissed Shirai-sensei on the lips, and she laughed! When I saw that, I thought my heart was going to explode! Like, bwaaaah!” Mitsuko placed her hands on her chest, then swung her hands outwards to simulate an explosion.

“Ehh!? They’ve gotten so bold!” Yasuko exclaimed in shock.

“Yeah! And then, and then, and then...” Mitsuko struggled to figure out what to say to Yasuko next. She held her hands in front of her as if she were ready to imitate something else. However, Yasuko briefly stopped her train of thought.

“Hey, Micchan. This is a very interesting story, but do you remember what I said about gossiping about other people?”

“Yeah! You said not to tell anyone, so I didn’t!”

“Are you suuure?” Yasuko tilted her head and looked at Mitsuko suspiciously. However, Mitsuko maintained a bright smile.

“Yup! Nobody!”

Yasuko continued to stare at her for a few seconds before changing her glare into a bright smile just like her granddaughter’s. “You’re a very good girl, Micchan!” She rubbed Mitsuko’s head, causing her to giggle. Mitsuko didn’t exactly tell nobody. If that were true, Yasuko wouldn’t have heard the story, but she wasn’t going to hold that against her.

“But Micchan, why were you following Shirai-sensei and Osada-sensei secretly?”

Mitsuko went silent. Yasuko chuckled.

“You shouldn’t stalk people, okay? It’s not very nice.”

“Okay...”

Yasuko rubbed Mitsuko’s head one last time before she handed her empty dishes through the kitchen window. Ryuuji was on the other side, already washing the cups and plates left in the sink.

“Take care of this for me, please,” she said gently, passing the dishes to her son. They nodded at each other with wide grins. After that, she took her purse from the dinner table and pushed her chair under. However, just before she could walk past Mitsuko, she tugged on her bright yellow blazer.

“You’re going already? I thought you still had more time...” Mitsuko whined. Yasuko leaned down and rubbed her granddaughter’s lush hair.

“Sorry, Micchan. I need to make another stop before I head to work.”

“B-but I’m not done talking to you yet!”

“Why don’t you go talk to your sisters? Or maybe Mom and Dad?”

“But I wanted to talk to you, only you!”

“Let’s talk again when I have the time, okay?”

“But there’s never any time... I’m always in school for so long, but when I come home, you always leave for work. It’s not enough...”

“That’s just the way it is, Mitsuko. You’ll get used to it.”

Mitsuko pouted and let go of her grandmother. She watched her approach the front door and put on her shiny red loafers.

“I’m off! See you later!” She said, waving at her granddaughters.

“Bye, Ya-chan!” The sisters said together. Mitsuko, however, was not as ecstatic.

Yasuko stepped through the front door and left the house happily, her lips, covered in red lipstick, forming a smile. Even at that time of day, the sun was still shining brightly, causing the pearls around her neck to dazzle in the light.

Haruko continued doing her homework and Katsuko continued watching TV, but Mitsuko was still feeling fussy about Yasuko leaving. Life was so much easier when Mitsuko was allowed to stay at home for every hour of the day, because Yasuko was almost always there. She could run up to her and just talk to her whenever she wanted. But with school taking up all her time, an ache was left in her heart every time she missed an opportunity to talk with her. After more than a year of schooling, that ache had only worsened.

Mitsuko was never satisfied speaking to her parents. It's not that they never cared, but it became exhausting waiting for them to keep up. Every time she tried, she was constantly met with the phrase "Sorry, can you repeat that?". At some point, she just stopped bothering to talk with them. Her sisters were a similar case. They had their own stories to tell and their own issues to discuss. She didn't want to talk over them, nor did she want to get talked over. They needed their own share of attention just like she did.

Of course, it wasn't their fault. They were just regular people that couldn't catch up with Mitsuko's long tangents (though Mitsuko never felt they were that long). Yasuko was just an exceptional listener, someone that had been by her side since the start, someone that was made just for her. She was special.

Now, Mitsuko had to take every opportunity she could to be with her special person.

After a few train rides and a stop at a local sweetshop, Yasuko wandered, with a plastic bag of freshly made dorayaki in her hand, through a neighbourhood different from the one she lived in. Despite the change in scenery, it was a place she knew like the back of her hand. She approached the front door of a house much older than the one her family lived in. The architecture of the entrance was ancient.

She rang the doorbell and listened to the buzzing from inside the house.

"Coming!" A woman's voice called out from behind the door. It gently slid open, an old lady greeting Yasuko. "Oh! Yasuko!" Yasuko waved energetically at the woman while she had a piece of dorayaki wedged in her mouth. The woman was none other than her own mother, Takasu Sonoko.

Yasuko sat around a short table with her parents in their living room. They helped themselves to the sweet treats Yasuko had brought while sipping on some steaming matcha tea. Takasu Seiji, Yasuko's father, was reading a newspaper while munching on the red bean-filled pancake.

"How's work been for you, Yasuko?" Seiji asked, his old voice ever so stern.

"Same old, same old. Some new hires are coming in tonight, and I'm supposed to be facilitating them," Yasuko said before biting into some dorayaki.

"When's your next break?" Sonoko asked.

"I don't know. I'll decide when I've planned where we should go next." Yasuko's cheeks were filled with cake and red bean paste.



“You’re still deciding, hm?” Seiji said. He lowered his newspaper and glared straight at Yasuko, who was sitting opposite of him. “Have you been brushing up on your English? You haven’t forgotten about that, have you?”

“Eh?” Yasuko’s eyes widened at her father’s sudden interrogation.

“Come on! Let’s test it right now! How do you ask for directions? Hm?” Seiji forcefully closed his newspaper and set it aside before planting his hands on his lap and leaning his back forward, staring deeper at his daughter.

“Eeeeeh...” Yasuko’s eyes shamefully drifted to the side.

“Oh, don’t put her on the spot like that, Seiji.” Sonoko chuckled playfully.

“Our options for vacation are far more limited if Yasuko doesn’t know English, Sonoko. I do *not* want a repeat of last time.” Seiji immediately recalled their time in Melbourne. He felt an immense sense of dread watching his daughter try to order at a restaurant in her broken English. So many embarrassing misunderstandings.

“B-b-but... I can use a tr-Translator...” Yasuko held up her phone and pointed to it, her body trembling. Seiji crossed his arms.

“You are hopeless, Yasuko,” he said in English, turning his head away.

“Eh!? Hopeless!? What does that mean?” Yasuko whined. While the two were bickering, Sonoko was struggling to suppress a laugh.

“Oh, sorry, what was that? I did not understand you,” Seiji said sarcastically.

“That’s just mean, Dad! I do not know what you are saying!”

“Then you better learn! Come, we will study, right now!”

“Eeeeeeh!?—”

Yasuko and her father’s scuffle was suddenly interrupted by Sonoko’s simpering. They turned to find her wiping away a tear. “Ahahahaha!” Then her simpering turned into uncontrollable laughter. All tension was quickly washed away when they realised the ridiculousness of the whole exchange. Yasuko giggled along with her mother while Seiji smirked and snickered.

“Haha! Things never change, do they? Ahah!” Sonoko said through her laughter.

“I suppose so,” Seiji said, looking at his wife.

Yasuko wistfully observed the smiles on her parents’ faces. Seeing their happiness made her shoulders feel lighter than a feather. Her face naturally formed a warm grin as well. Every visit she made to her parents’ home always ended that way; with a smile.

Once the sun began to set, Yasuko departed and boarded the train heading to her workplace, Okonomiyaki and Benzaiten Heaven. She oversaw the new hires, making sure their work was proper, while helping around the store too. Her gentle gaze and cheery voice made the new hires feel welcomed and at ease. With her staunch leadership as the store's manager, the night at the store ran smoothly.

Closing time arrived and Yasuko yawned while she stood outside the restaurant. Once the lights were shut off, a male coworker joined her, locking the front door before leaving with her. Strangely, they walked down the busy streets of the city, holding each other's hand.

It wasn't out of the ordinary for Yasuko to snack at a Lawson until the first train started running at 5 AM. However, as her days working at the store went on, she had found another way to pass the time. The bright scenery of the city lights slowly transitioned into a tranquil, quiet neighbourhood. Yasuko and the man accompanying her would reach their destination. It was 3:39 AM by the time they arrived.

They entered a luxury apartment just like the one Taiga lived in. While it sat near a train station that led to her neighbourhood, this apartment was nowhere near her home, her old home, nor her parents' home. It was a place entirely detached from the life she had with her family. And yet, Yasuko set foot into the clean, modern apartment without any hesitation. The man with her stretched his arm behind her back and rested his hand on her wide waist.

The curtains were drawn in every room. The air was chilled. Everything about the apartment seemed to be in order, except for the clothes that were strewn all over the laminated wooden floor. The clothes formed a trail towards a corridor. The trail ended when it reached a bedroom door.

"Hm... Mhm... Hmhm..." Yasuko and the man hummed in harmony. They rustled underneath the bright white covers of a queen-sized bed, hugging each other and rolling around like two pandas. Yasuko laid on top of the man. Her lips smacked against his while she held his cheeks. The man's arms were wrapped around her bare back.

Eventually, Yasuko pulled her lips away. She laid her back on the man's soft, bare body. He looked to be around her age. The man reached over the nightstand to put his rectangular glasses on and switch on the lamp atop of it. Yasuko tilted her head back into his neck and nuzzled it. The man stretched his arm over her body and rested his other hand on one of Yasuko's voluptuous breasts under the covers. He rested his chin on her forehead.

"Thank you for tonight, Ta-kun," Yasuko said gently.

"You too, Yasuko," Taku said. "How about we head out for supper tomorrow after work? I know a place that's open 24 hours. They've got the best desserts in town."

“Oh, I’d love to!”

Kurasawa Taku was a male coworker of Yasuko’s that had grown quite close to her. They both had the same role at the store, which was to manage it. A bond that formed after working together so tightly. After some time, they started to take interest in each other, which snowballed into what would become of them now. With their diligent synergy at work and their deep care for each other, the two became like two peas in a pod and frequently lived a night life filled with love and sex.

Taku looked down at Yasuko while she cheerfully nestled underneath the covers. They chuckled to each other while Taku fondled Yasuko’s breast.

“How’re you doing at home, Yasuko?” He asked with a gentle smile on his face.

“I’m fine. Not much really happens these days,” Yasuko’s finger caressed Taku’s arm.

“You’re still finding a place to go with your parents, right? How about the Netherlands? I told you about the time I went there with my parents, remember?”

“Hm... I’ll think about it...” Yasuko grasped Taku’s hand that was on her breast, adding more pressure to it. “Hey, Ta-kun, do you think it might be time for marriage?”

“Why do you ask that?”

Yasuko rested her pillowy cheek on Taku’s chest. “Just asking for the sake of it... I mean, it feels like we’ve been together for so long. We’ve even introduced ourselves to each other’s parents... Though, I’m not sure if they’d approve of what we get up to every night. At least, not unless we marry.”

“Right... It’s crazy, isn’t it? We’ve already gone through all that trouble and yet...”

“We still haven’t tied the knot...” Yasuko sighed before turning her whole body. Their chests pressed against each other.

“Oh?” Taku said when Yasuko suddenly brushed her lips against his. “Still got a little steam in ya, huh?” He said after she pulled away. They smiled and chuckled at each other, their eyes glistening in the dark.

“Do you want to keep going?” Yasuko asked.

“Yeah, just give me a few minutes to rest.”

Yasuko rested her head below Taku’s neck again. Taku leaned his head atop of hers, smelling her luscious hair. “To be honest, Ta-kun...” She started running her finger across Taku’s arm. “I think I might need a little more time.”

“Is that so?”

Yasuko looked down sorrowfully. “Yeah. Sorry, I didn’t mean to get you excited or anything. I’m just focused on other things right now. I just wanted to clarify—”

“It’s okay,” Taku said. His gentle voice sent a wave of warmth through Yasuko’s body. “You’re focused on your parents, aren’t you?”

“I am...” Yasuko lightened up, feeling deeply pleased by Taku’s understanding.

“Just take as much time as you need. I promised I’d never get in between you and your parents, especially after learning about what happened to you all those years ago.” Taku wrapped his arms around Yasuko’s soft and smooth back, coddling her in a warm embrace.. “And besides, I think I’m happy where we are now. I have a lot of fun managing the store with you, and seeing you every night is like a wonderful end to my day. We don’t need to get married or have children. I just want to call you mine.”

“Thank you, Ta-kun.” Yasuko comfortably buried her face in his chest. “I feel just the same way. Especially the part about children. If I get pregnant now, that might complicate things.” She chuckled.

“I wouldn’t say I’m suited for kids either, hehe...” They both giggled in agreement. “But it is nice seeing your grandchildren every now and then. Ryuuji’s a great kid, too.”

“Mhm~ I’m a pretty awesome mother already.” Yasuko sighed, feeling deeply relaxed by Taku’s warm embrace. Suddenly, she jolted when she felt her rump get squeezed tightly. “Ooh! Are you ready to go again?”

“Yeah. Work your magic, Yasuko.” Taku said before receiving a toothy grin from Yasuko. She started shuffling her hips around, the big bump under the covers behind her moving from left to right. While she was getting into position, Taku looked to the ceiling while he pondered.

“You know, now that I think about it, I should probably take my parents somewhere too. It’s been a minute since I’ve done that.” He looked at Yasuko enthusiastically. “Could you tell me more about that time you went to Bangkok?”

“Oh my, Bangkok? It was absolutely lovely!” Once Yasuko started talking, Taku removed his glasses. “It’s one of my most favourite places for holiday so far! The hotel my parents and I went to was incredible! You see–Uwah!” Taku buried his face into Yasuko’s neck, smooching it incessantly.

“Keep talking, Yasuko. I still want to hear more.”

“Haha! Okay! So, when I landed, I saw...”

Yasuko rambled about her trip to Bangkok while she made her move. Taku continued intimately kissing Yasuko’s body while he ran his fingers through her blonde hair, looking at her beautiful, young face with delight. He laughed at every funny recounting Yasuko gave and took note of all the exciting sights she told him about. With each question he asked,

Yasuko answered excitedly, taking joy in sharing her wonderful experiences. They chatted joyfully all while making love to each other.

The sun had risen by the time Yasuko left Taku's apartment. Her sessions with her lover gave her just enough energy to make it home. She skipped to the station and happily began her journey home. She walked away from the apartment knowing she was going to drop by again the next night.

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“... Hm?”

Yasuko was laying in her bed again. The sun was glaring through her curtains. The digital clock on her nightstand read “7:54 AM”, a rather unusual time for her to be awake with how late she usually slept.

“I guess I'm starting my day early today...”

After leaving her room, Yasuko found Ryuuji in the kitchen washing some dirty dishes. She also spotted little Yuuchi at the dinner table having breakfast with his mother. Taiga was helping her son practise using chopsticks. She clapped softly after Yuuchi managed to lift a piece of chicken into his mouth. She couldn't help but smile at the adorable sight, especially with how much Yuuchi took after his mother, from the hair to his height.

“Oh, you're up already?” Ryuuji asked while wiping a plate.

Yasuko rubbed her eye. “Yeah, I just woke up on my own... Where are the girls?”

“They've already left for school.”

“Ah... right. They're already at that age where they become independent. Eight years old... Time flies by fast, doesn't it?” Yasuko sighed with relief while she confidently placed her hands on her hips.

“They've been going on their own for a while now. You were always too tired to see.”

Yasuko noticed her son's clothes behind his apron. He seemed to be ready to head outside based on what he was wearing. “Where are you going, Ryuu-chan?”

“Taiga and I are bringing Yuuchi out to get some school supplies. He starts school next year, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, I remember.” Yasuko blissfully watched her daughter-in-law and grandson sharing a meal together. “Hehe... He looks like he was born just yesterday...”

“Do you want to come along?”

“I'm fine. I might go back to sleep later.” She yawned.

Once they were about to leave, the family stood at the front door. Taiga, who was already prepared to leave, stood over her husband while he helped their son tie his shoelaces. Yasuko waved at her children and grandchild as they left through the front door. After the door was shut behind them, the house fell quiet. *They've grown so independent.* She thought.

It was a rather nostalgic day for Yasuko. The memories of living in that cramped two-bedroom apartment. When Ryuuji was a child, she had to do the housework, bring food to the table and raise her son all at the same time. Eventually, when Ryuuji got older, she was reduced to just the breadwinner. Then she became more of a nanny after her grandchildren were born. Now, it seemed that Ryuuji's family had all they needed.

Ryuuji had become such an efficient stay-at-home dad that there wasn't any housework left for Yasuko to help out with. All she could do was dawdle around the house until she had to leave for work. Taiga had gotten a job that paid well enough to support her entire family, including Yasuko herself. She remembered fondly of the time Taiga hastily turned down the allowance she tried to give her. "I don't need it! Use it for yourself!" were the words Taiga yelled at her.

Yasuko suddenly looked around awkwardly. *It really is quiet...* She said to herself.

Of course, it was only natural for the house to be in that state, especially when her granddaughters were in school for most of the day. They were always making noise when they were home. Every now and then, Yasuko got caught up in whatever games they were playing, whether it be playing pretend or terrorising their mother. It made the house much livelier. Some part of her started to miss that chaos, but alas, it was an inevitability for any child, one that had to be accepted.

Somehow, thinking of how much things had changed made her happy too. *I think I've given everything I could to this family,* was what she believed. With both her children and grandchildren growing to stand on their own, it seemed that Yasuko's work at the Takasu household was over. It only became a question of what she was going to do next.

Yasuko sat in the living room watching the midday dramas on the TV. She huffed with boredom. She'd showered and gotten changed, and ate the lunch Ryuuji left for her in the fridge. The dramas weren't really that interesting either. There really wasn't much for her to do that day. Ryuuji had already cleaned the house before he left. At that point, she was just waiting for her granddaughters to come home from school.

Then, she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket.

She pulled it out while her eyes were glued to the screen. “Hello? It’s Yasuko.” A woman called her name on the other end. It was her mother’s voice. “Mm... Yeah?” She let her mother speak on the other end. However, there was a certain set of words that made her jaw drop. Her body froze in place.

Her phone fell out of her hand.

Seiji looked out the window of his room. The lights were off. The sunlight’s glare was weakened by the drawn curtains. It was dark. The patient sitting across from him was snoring away, both of them donning hospital gowns.

*Thump, thump, thump...*

The sound of someone’s hasty footsteps echoed through the corridors. The doctors and nurses recoiled back as a visitor ran by.

Seiji sighed. He started fidgeting with his phone in his hands while he looked at the ceiling. Suddenly, he winced. The patient across from him let out an irritably loud snore. He glared at the sleeping old man in front of him, but quickly relaxed when he realised it wasn’t worth the trouble bothering him.

*Thump, thump, thump...*

The visitor frantically looked around at the signs above them while they panted heavily. They struggled to navigate the labyrinth of the hospital.

Sonoko wrapped her palms over her husband’s wrinkly hands. She sat at Seiji’s bedside. Their old, sunken eyes met. Seiji softened his gaze every time he looked at his wife’s gentle smile. Sonoko leaned into her husband’s brittle chest. Seiji rested his chin on Sonoko’s hair. Receiving each other’s body warmth made Seiji’s stay a little less of a bore.

*Thump, thump, thump...*

The door to the room swung open.

“Haah... Haah... Haah...”

Sonoko and Seiji turned to the blonde woman standing in the doorway. Her head rose and fell as she panted. Her cheeks were bright red and soaked in tears. After regaining her energy, she held her head high and looked at Seiji with great distress.

“Oh, Yasuko—”

Seiji was interrupted when Yasuko suddenly staggered forward. She overstepped left and right, almost looking like a zombie pouncing on their target. Then, she tripped at her father’s bedside and gripped the handles on the hospital bed. Seiji flinched when his daughter suddenly lifted her head right in front of him.

“I-Is everything okay!? What did the doctor say!?” She said, her voice shaky. Seiji only huffed and crossed his arms. Sonoko slowly stood up and gently placed her hands on Yasuko’s shoulders.

“He’s okay, Yasuko. He just had a mild stroke at work.”

“Wh-what about now? Are there any effects from the stroke?”

“He won’t be able to walk for a while. He’s lost control of his legs, that’s all.”

Yasuko trembled as her back lowered. She struggled to hold herself back. Tears flowed from her eyes like rainwater running down a hill, wetting her cheeks further. “Ufuh... Ufuh...” She sobbed, her body rocking with each grunt as she tried to suppress her cries. Sonoko massaged her shoulders.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, Yasuko. The stroke wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been. Your father’s a lucky man, you know. With a little physiotherapy, he’ll be back on his feet in no time. We’ll go on another vacation once he’s recovered.”

“Hold on. It’s not just my legs. I’ve also got memory loss,” Seiji said nonchalantly.

Yasuko’s watery eyes widened. Her body shot up as she looked at her father in devastation. “M-memory loss!?” She cried. Her mother seemed just as shocked as she was.

“Yes. I’ve forgotten all my English. So while I’m recovering, you have to go study.”

*Oh.* Yasuko and Sonoko’s shock immediately died down. Seiji looked at the two women the way he always did when he spoke to them. They couldn’t detect any sense of urgency or self awareness in him at all. Sonoko pinched her eyes and sighed. Then, Seiji recoiled when Yasuko fell to her knees and buried her face in his bed covers.

“Waaaaaaah!” Yasuko wailed, soaking the white covers. “Please, don’t joke at a time like this! Waaaaah!” Her voice was muffled. “I thought you were gone for good!” She sniffled before continuing to wail.

*Ah. Poor timing.* Seiji thought to himself as he looked at his sobbing daughter awkwardly. Jokes weren’t ever really his strong suit. He slowly moved his hand over his daughter’s head, gently rubbing her golden blonde hair.

“Come on, Yasuko, don’t cry like that. I’m fine. I didn’t sustain anything that medicine can’t fix. Besides, you were the one that kept joking about me being old and weak. Why do you look so surprised?”

“Because I was just joking! I didn’t think something like this would happen so soon!” Yasuko said as she looked up from the covers, her entire face covered with tears. Seiji looked into her big, watery eyes and could only feel pity for his daughter.



“Look, Yasuko. I’m at that age where something like a stroke is natural. Something like this was bound to happen eventually. So just cheer up, alright?”

“That doesn’t make this any easier...” Yasuko said, her voice groggy from crying.

A drop of sweat ran down Seiji’s head as he just looked at his daughter cluelessly. He turned to his wife, who was only looking at him in disbelief. When their eyes met, she scornfully held her hand out as if she were saying, *What are you doing!?* Perhaps consolation wasn’t his strong suit either. With nothing comforting to say, he resigned.

“There’s no way to escape the inescapable. I know that’s true. But I also don’t believe that I’m leaving anytime soon. But you know what, Yasuko?” He lifted his daughter’s chin and smirked. “Let’s say it really is time for me to go. The last thing I want to see is you crying on my way out. That doesn’t bring me any comfort.” He leaned closer to his sniffling daughter. “When the day comes, give me a big, cheery smile like you always do. That way, I’d know that the time we spent together was all worth it. Then, I’d truly be at rest.”

The river of tears slowly came to a halt. Yasuko’s head slipped off the bed. She sat on the floor, her legs spread out and her back slumping forward. Her long hair drooped over her head. She looked like a wilted flower. Sonoko knelt down to embrace her.

“You understand what I said, right, Yasuko?”

“Yeah... I’ll be strong,” Yasuko said weakly. She sniffled one last time.

“Good. But like I said, I’m not going to leave anytime soon. So don’t go planning my funeral already,” Seiji said snarkily.

Yasuko’s crying fit ended there. However, one thought remained in her head.

*I really don’t have much time left with him.*

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“Noooooooooooo!”

“M-Micchan!?”

Mitsuko held onto Yasuko’s shorts tightly, hindering her movements as she tried to walk towards the open luggage lying next to the front door, with her hands full with her clothes and other trinkets.

“Waaaaah!” Mitsuko’s face had turned completely red from crying. Her eyes and nostrils were dripping wet, and her mouth was wide open as she wailed. “Pleeeeeeease! Ya-chaaaaan! Don’t goooo! Waaaaah!” Her cries had turned into high-pitched shrills as she continued to throw a fit.

“Micchan...”

Mitsuko buried her face in her leg. Haruko and Katsuko timidly approached as well with watery eyes. “Y... Ya-chan...” The two girls said nervously. They sniffled, before joining Mitsuko in burying their faces into Yasuko’s leg. “Don’t go, Ya-chaaaaan!” They all cried out in unison.

“Oh, girls...” Yasuko couldn’t move, not with her granddaughters clamping her where she stood. Seeing the girls wipe their tears on her skin made her feel quite guilty.

It was Saturday night at the Takasu household. They were having their usual weekend dinner together as a family. When Yasuko finished her meal before everyone else, she took the initiative to start packing her luggage for when she moved to her parents’ place. That was the moment the news of Yasuko’s departure from the Takasu household broke out.

“Oi! Girls! Stop bothering Ya-chan! Go finish your dinner!” Taiga shouted. She pulled Haruko and Katsuko off Yasuko’s leg. After being separated from their grandmother, they sorrowfully returned to the dinner table to resume their meal. Mitsuko, however, was not as cooperative. Ryuuji and Yuuchi watched the entire scuffle from a distance.

Taiga placed her hands beneath Mitsuko’s armpits and tried to pull her away, but Mitsuko clinged on like a cat refusing to return to its cage. “Come on, Mitsuko! Don’t get in the way of her packing!” Taiga grunted.

“No! She can’t go! She can’t! It’s not fair!” Mitsuko whined. “Kyaaaaaaah!” She amplified her cries when Taiga pulled harder on her body. She tightened her grip on Yasuko’s bare leg, digging her little fingers into her skin.

Yasuko rested her hands on Taiga’s before gently pulling them away from Mitsuko. “Let me handle this, Taiga-chan.” Her daughter-in-law took a step back as she watched Yasuko kneel down to Mitsuko’s level. She held Mitsuko’s soft cheeks and looked deep into her big, doll-like eyes. She sniffled. Yasuko used her thumbs to wipe off the tears still flowing from her eyes, but it never seemed to end. The tears dripped from the tip of her chin. There was enough buildup to form a little puddle at her feet.

“Everything’s going to be okay, Micchan. You must be really sad that Ya-chan’s going away, right? Who else is Micchan going to talk to, that’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it?” Yasuko spoke with her voice as gentle as the ocean breeze. Mitsuko nodded vigorously. “But you know, Micchan. Nothing is forever. Ya-chan has other responsibilities to attend to. I have my own parents that I need to take care of—”

“No!”

Mitsuko yelled before burying her face in Yasuko's soft, bare chest. She grasped the back of her tank top tightly like a crab. "Every day, every time... I only want to talk to you, but I never get to talk to you! I have to go to school... But now, when I come home, you won't be there! It's not fair!" She looked up at Yasuko and pouted sadly.

Yasuko held Mitsuko's little back and caressed her hair. "I'm sorry, Micchan. But this is out of my control. You know, if I was allowed to, I would talk to you at all hours of the day! But I can't do everything, Micchan." She leaned in and rubbed her soft cheek against her granddaughter's forehead. "I'm very busy at the moment, okay? But that doesn't mean I won't talk to you ever again. I'll just be really far away, that's all."

Finally, Yasuko pulled Mitsuko's head away, gently holding her face. "Maybe we'll figure something out after I've moved in with my parents. But for now, be strong for Ya-chan, okay?" She gave her granddaughter a bright smile. However, Mitsuko didn't nod or smile. Her tears only dried up. She simply turned away and walked back to the dinner table with listlessness. Her mouth was sealed shut, only opening ever so slightly so she could put food into her mouth.

"Do you think she's going to be okay?" Taiga asked, her worried, motherly eyes focused on Mitsuko.

"Micchan is a strong and obedient girl. I think she'll get used to me being away." Yasuko said while she resumed her packing.

After finishing their meal, it was time for the children to head to bed. An hour into the night, Haruko and Katsuko were sleeping comfortably. However, Mitsuko's eyes were only half shut. Her eyes were still red from crying. She sniffled before she finally succumbed to exhaustion and let her eyes close.

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Yasuko stood by the entrance of her parents' home as she watched Taiga, Ryuuji and Yuuchi put their shoes on, preparing to leave. Taiga kept her eyes on her son, ensuring he puts his shoes on correctly. Once they slid the front door open, Yasuko approached them with her arms open wide. First, she wrapped her arms around her son.

"Thank you so much for helping me move," she said.

"We're going to miss you, Yasuko. You've taken such good care of us," Ryuuji said in his beloved mother's ear. Yasuko then moved to Taiga, hugging her slim figure. Just when she was about to pull away, Taiga held her arms intimately.

“I really can’t thank you enough, Ya-chan. Especially when you helped me with my daughters when they were babies. It means the world to me,” Taiga said as she shed a tear. Yasuko chuckled and wiped the single tear away.

“Well, I was just doing my job. Do drop by every now and then, okay?” Yasuko said. Taiga nodded before turning away. Taiga and Ryuuji walked off, with Yuuchi standing between them. They held both his little hands as they walked side-by-side. Yasuko sighed with relief as she shut the front door.

Yasuko ran into her mother in the corridor. She pointed in the direction of the bedrooms, gesturing for her to follow her. The two women sneakily opened the door to Seiji and Sonoko’s bedroom. There, Seiji laid in bed, fast asleep. They walked towards him carefully, trying not to make any creaks in the floorboards. When they stood at his bedside, they could hear a quiet snore.

Yasuko frowned at the sight of her elderly father. Maybe it was because she never looked closer during the times they’d met, or it was because he always wore rather baggy clothes, but Seiji seemed so much thinner compared to when she saw him in the hospital. His short, grey beard was uneven on his chin. She gently moved her hand over his arm, which was as thin as a twig. Witnessing her father in such a sorry state made it difficult to see the bright side in this situation, if there even was one.

The two women quietly left the bedroom, shutting the door behind them.

“He’s supposed to do some exercises once he’s done with his nap,” Sonoko said as the two walked along the corridor.

“What about you, Mom? Are you feeling alright?”

“Oh, me?” Sonoko giggled lightly. “I’m fit as a fiddle. We only need to monitor *him*, remember?” She rubbed Yasuko’s shoulder playfully. They entered Yasuko’s bedroom. It was filled with cardboard boxes, with a futon lying right in the middle. They went to different sides of the room, opening boxes and carefully emptying the contents onto the floor.

“It’s nice having you live with us again, Yasuko. You were just a child the last time you lived here. Now you’re more like the breadwinner, with your father out of work and all. Isn’t that funny?”

“Yeah. I guess it is.” Yasuko chuckled as she arranged her vacation souvenirs in rows.

“As for me, well, I’m still the housewife. It doesn’t look like that’ll be changing anytime soon. Or, not even in the far future.”

“Things never change, do they?” Yasuko and Sonoko giggled together.

The room quickly fell silent, the silence only occasionally broken by the clinks and clanks of Yasuko's items being shifted around. Sonoko maintained a cheery smile on her face while she helped Yasuko get her room set up. But with Yasuko's back facing her, she wouldn't notice the deadpan frown on her face.

*I can't keep holding on.* She thought. Perhaps it would be better for her to get used to the feeling of no longer having her parents around. Maybe it would hurt less when they do eventually kick the bucket. She's already lived sixteen years without them. She could live a few more. Travelling the whole world with them was nothing but a fantasy. There were only so many places they could visit before they'd grow too old to move.

But it begged the question. *What am I going to do after they're gone?* If Yasuko had the answer, there was a possibility that the loss of her parents would hurt less. Once they were gone, at least she wouldn't feel lonely.

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Nearly three months had passed since Yasuko moved out of the Takasu household. Little Mitsuko sat quietly in front of the dryer in the laundry room. She watched the inside rumble and tumble while it operated. The intense shaking sound led her to cover her ears. She was easy to overwhelm with loud shrills. Her eyes rotated as she followed what was getting tossed inside; it was a wet Panpanda plushie.

"Panpanda? That's a show for babies!"

"Mitsuko really is a baby, huh?"

"Go back to preschool, Mitsuko!"

Haruko and Katsuko were held back in school that day as disciplinary action. They sat in an empty classroom with a few other kids, shooting glares at them every now and then. They were to spend fifteen minutes filling two entire pages with the phrase "I will not punch, kick or scratch my classmates". That day Mitsuko left the school gates on her own.

Without a teacher in sight, a wave of girls and boys passed over Mitsuko. Not all of them were friends with one another, but they were all from Mitsuko's class and they weren't afraid to pick on her, especially with Haruko and Katsuko's absence. But since it was the end of the school day, none of them wanted to linger.

Mitsuko watched the ants crawling on the ground while the jeers and cackles of her classmates entered her ears. They were just words, after all. She hugged her little Panpanda

plushie to her chest and kept her eyes low, only taking in the comforting softness touching her chest. However, one of the boys jabbed their elbow into her side.

It had rained earlier that morning. The force of the jab caused Mitsuko to drop her plushie into a puddle of dirty water. She watched in disbelief as her plushie soaked up the murky liquid and changed to a dull grey colour. The wave of classmates left and laughed at the pitiful sight as she stood there sorrowfully.

Ryuuji liked to fold the laundry in front of the TV so he could see his daughters come through the front door after a day at school. When he heard it open, he was prepared to give his beloved daughters a pleasant welcome home. However, what he saw that day was the miserable sight of Mitsuko standing in the doorway alone with a dirty plushie dangling from her hand by its little soft arm.

“Don’t worry, Mitsuko. He’ll be all clean before bed,” Ryuuji said soothingly while he rubbed Mitsuko’s hair. They stood in front of the washing machine while the plushie got tossed around in soap water and suds. Mitsuko sat in front of the washing machine, waiting for her plushie to be free and clean, but her father gently took her shoulder. “Mitsuko, it’s going to take a while. Maybe you should do something else while you wait.” But she wouldn’t budge.

Eventually, Mitsuko found herself silently doing her homework at the dinner table with her sisters. Ryuuji was making dinner in the kitchen. While she was solving Math problems in their workbooks, Taiga approached her from the other side of the dinner table after leaving the laundry room. She slid the plushie across, leaving it in front of Mitsuko.

“Hey, Mitsuko. Do you remember what I said about bringing Panpanda to school?” Taiga asked her daughter.

“Don’t take him out during class. Only hold him when I’m stressed.”

“Did you have it out while you were walking?”

Mitsuko nodded.

“Did somebody push you and make you drop him?”

Mitsuko looked at her mother for a moment. Her lips opened, as if she were about to say something, but instead, she shook her head and grinned at her mother. “Someone bumped into me by accident.”

Taiga narrowed her eyes on her daughter. However, Katsuko suddenly stood from her seat to open her mouth. “Eh!? Someone bumped into you? Who did it? I’ll teach them to watch where they’re going!” Katsuko punched her fist and palm together.

“No! Don’t!” Mitsuko pleaded.

“Katsuko, you’ve still got two more days of punishment at school! Do *not* get into another fight!” Taiga yelled at Katsuko. The little girl sat back down and pouted. Taiga sighed. “So it was an accident, huh?” She rubbed Mitsuko’s head. “Don’t worry about it. We can wash him if it happens again.” Taiga knew her daughter was lying, but she didn’t want to put her on the spot. All she could do was send some comforting words.

That night, Mitsuko entered the laundry room again with her plushie in hand. Her eyes were on Yasuko’s bedroom door. However, when she opened the door, the bedroom was completely desolate.

Sure, there was a bed, a nightstand and all the necessities to constitute this place a “bedroom”. But all traces of Yasuko were gone. It wasn’t decorated with any colourful trinkets she’d collected from her vacations or the family photos they’d taken when Mitsuko and her sisters were toddlers.

It was just dark. The walls were pitch black. There was only a faint light coming through the curtains above the bed. But even without the colourful trinkets or family photos, there was just one thing that was missing that actually mattered: Yasuko herself.

Mitsuko shut the door behind her and pulled off the bedcovers. She laid on the bed that Yasuko used to sleep in, hugging her plushie tightly. With her head in the pillow and her face watching the window, she’d imagine herself laying in Yasuko’s lap while she stroked her little arm. *Ya-chan, a boy pushed me at school today.* Something Mitsuko would’ve said had she been here.

*I dropped Panpanda in a puddle today.* The plushie was a gift from Yasuko on her and her sisters’ 5th birthday. Her sisters had ones too, with slightly different designs, but they were never the type to bring them to school. They were all ecstatic to receive such a gift that they gave Yasuko a big hug. *Would you get mad at me if I got him dirty?* Yasuko wasn’t around for Mitsuko to ask the question.

*Hey, Ya-chan...* Mitsuko curled up into a ball. *What should I do?* She whimpered, her salty tears running down the bridge of her nose and getting absorbed by the fabric of the pillow. *What am I supposed to do, Ya-chan?* Her silent cries were the only sound present in that empty room.

Later, Taiga approached Yasuko’s old room when she realised Mitsuko wasn’t in her bed. She slowly turned the doorknob and slid the door open. She found her daughter curled up in a ball on her grandmother’s bed. It was quiet. She silently crept forward to the bed and stood over her daughter.

When she looked closer, she could see her daughter's rosy cheeks and dried face. She felt her fingers on the pillow around her eyes. It was wet. It was obvious. She'd been crying. Taiga frowned. She'd wished she'd done something. She'd wished that she could've soothed her better. She could see the hardened expression on her daughter's face. Her eyes were strained. It was the look that was left over from crying before she'd fallen asleep.

Taiga stroked her daughter's little arm. Then, she drew the bed covers over her daughter, tucking her in comfortably. She slowly leaned in and gave Mitsuko a deep kiss on her soft cheek. She stuck her lips to her daughter's face for a few seconds. During that time, her daughter's face softened. She was at ease. Then, she pulled her lips away and brushed her daughter's brunette hair behind her ear.

Taiga gently closed the bedroom door behind her, leaving Mitsuko to rest. Tomorrow was another day.

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"Kishimoto-san, there's broken glass at table 9. Can you clean that up?" Yasuko pointed her colleague to the table a few metres away from them. It was a busy night at Okonomiyaki and Benzaiten Heaven. Most of the tables were filled by salarymen frying some okonomiyaki at their griddles.

Yasuko was standing by the front of the store, managing the reception. As she idled by the glass door, looking out into the bustling city streets and waiting for another customer to arrive, there was a moment earlier in the day that Yasuko couldn't stop thinking about.

"Haah... Haah... Haah..."

The sound of Seiji's soft panting filled his soundless bedroom. He laid on his bed with his eyes shut and beads of sweat rolling down his cheeks. Sonoko silently sat by his bedside, grasping his hand tightly. There wasn't much going on in her head at that moment. She only hoped that her husband was resting comfortably.

The bedroom door slid open. Yasuko entered and joined her mother at her father's bedside. She wasn't sure if she was imagining things or if it was just the dim lighting, but to her, Seiji looked paler. It was 3 PM. The soft afternoon sun pierced the sheer curtains in her parents' bedroom.

"He's been sleeping a lot lately..." Yasuko said.

"He's just exhausted," her mother said calmly.



“Hey, Mom, do you really think he’s going to be okay? The doctor said he was supposed to be able to walk around by now.”

“It’ll just take a little longer, dear. Your father’s been working hard the past few weeks trying to get himself to walk again. But he also needs his rest.”

“But...” Yasuko bit her tongue. She wasn’t seeing any sign of recovery in her father. The sorry sight of his thin body and pale skin wasn’t helping either. It looked like the worst really was coming, but alarming her mother probably wouldn’t be a good idea; not for her or her husband. It would be better to let the peace remain. However, she still had something to ask of Sonoko.

“What’re you going to do if he doesn’t recover, Mom?”

“He’ll recover,” Sonoko said calmly.

“I don’t think we can be so certain, Mom...” Yasuko whined.

“He’ll be fine. It’ll just take a little patience, that’s all.”

Sonoko stroked her husband’s slender arm and smiled. But Yasuko could only furrow her brows. No matter what anyone said, she just couldn’t see the light in this predicament.

*Patience.* Yasuko thought while she stood by the entrance of the store. *Patience, or desperation?* The state of her father’s health was something she had already begun to accept. The only thing she wondered was what she was going to do as a result of it. It didn’t seem like her mother knew what she was going to do. Perhaps it would be better to search for the answer herself.

The glass door swung open. A group of older men walked through. She turned to the new visitors and lowered her head to bow.

“Welcome—”

“Eh? Mirano-chan?”

“Huh?” The utterance of Yasuko’s old stage name caught her attention. She quickly lifted her head up to look at the man that said it. He was the shortest of the group. He was bald on the top of his head and was left with sideburns that had turned white. His face was covered in deep wrinkles, but he had the face of a happy fool. Even though his appearance had changed drastically, Yasuko could recognise that face instantly.

“Oh, Inage-san! It’s been a while,” Yasuko said cheerfully. Inage opened his arms wide with great joy.

“It really is you! What a pleasure it is to meet you again!”

“I was expecting to see you around here more often with how regularly you visited the hostess bar. Did something happen?”

“I was thinking the same thing! When I returned to the bar, they told me you were working at some okonomiyaki store in a different city. But it was just so far away, I never found the time to visit. I forgot about it eventually and happened to come upon this place with my friends.” Inage’s friends waved to Yasuko. He energetically pointed at Yasuko. “But look at you! It’s been a decade and you haven’t changed one bit!”

Yasuko chuckled and gracefully posed with a little peace sign. “That’s right! Mirano-chan is eternally 23!” However, she quickly composed herself. “Ah, but I don’t go by that name anymore. Now, I’m Takasu Yasuko! Shift Manager of Okonomiyaki and Benzaiten Heaven, beloved grandmother to four children!” She saluted like an army general.

“Four grandchildren!? Your boy’s a real lovmaker! Haha!” Inage laughed with his chest. “Well, it’s been nice seeing you. I might drop by more often.”

“It’s been nice seeing you, too.” Seeing the line forming outside, Yasuko quickly returned her focus to work. “Ah! Let me show you to your table.” She guided the group of men, gesturing gracefully to follow her.

As the men walked behind her, a name rang in her head. *Mirano...*

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*Bzzzzt!*

“Coming!”

Hearing the front door’s buzzer, Yasuko approached in her loungewear. She slid the door open, expecting to find someone standing right in front of her. “Eh?” The person standing there was a bit shorter than she’d expected. Her visitor’s head of brunette hair was just below her chest level. When she tilted her head down, she froze in confusion.

“Eeeehhh???”

The visitor was none other than her beloved granddaughter, Mitsuko. She was carrying her school bag on her back and looking at Yasuko idly. Her clueless expression quickly turned into that of elation as her eyes lit up and a wide smile formed across her face. She giggled and jumped forward.

“Ya-chan!” She said while hugging Yasuko’s legs.

“Eeeehhh???” Yasuko raised an eyebrow at her cheery granddaughter with her mouth agape as she had yet to process her granddaughter’s presence. There were so many questions

running through her mind. *What's she doing here alone? Where are her parents? Did she come here all the way from school on her own?*

Then, her phone rang.

She pulled it out. The call was from Taiga.

She answered.

“Y-Ya-chan! Haaah...” Yasuko was greeted by Taiga’s exasperated panting. She took no breaths between each sentence she spoke. “Have you seen Mitsuko? It’s almost been two hours and she hasn’t returned home! Her teachers said she left school on her own and her sisters don’t know where she is because she got held back! Ya-chan, please, tell me you’ve seen her, please...”

Yasuko paused after Taiga’s ramble before opening her mouth, still processing everything she’d said. Her words came out faster than a rapper can speak.

“Uh... Yeah, I’ve seen her,” she said, looking at the little girl happily hugging her bare legs with befuddlement.

“Really!? Where?”

Mitsuko knelt over the short table in the living room. She held her chest high as she blabbered to Yasuko, who had entered the room with a tray of leftover biscuits and cookies, alongside a glass jug of cold, fresh milk.

“And then she told us to call her Yukina-sensei, because she actually stopped being Shirai-sensei and became Osada-sensei in November last year! Then, the first Osada-sensei told us to call him Masaki-sensei instead! So it turns out they were both in love the whole time!” Mitsuko said with a smile.

“Eeh? So they told everyone anyway? Why did they stop keeping it a secret? Actually, why did they keep it a secret for so long?” Yasuko rested her elbow on the table while munching on a biscuit.

“Yukina-sensei said that it was going to be public at some point, so they just told everyone now. But they kept it a secret because they still weren’t sure about being in love back then,” Mitsuko helped herself to a glass of milk.

“Ah... So they wanted to be sure before they told everyone...”

“But now that Yukina-sensei said it, I think I understand why she wasn’t sure.”

“Hm? Why’s that?” Yasuko leaned in and looked at her granddaughter attentively.

“Because Masaki-sensei likes to bully her about her weight,” Mitsuko said while she chewed a cookie. Yasuko recoiled back and looked at Mitsuko in disbelief.

“Huh? Why would she marry someone like that? What did he say about her weight?”

“I don’t know. But every week I see him poking and feeling her tummy, then laughing. It looks like Yukina-sensei is fine with it though, because she always laughs along.”

“Oooh...” Yasuko lightened up after realising what was really happening.

*Bzzzzt!*

“Ah, she’s here.”

Taiga stood in the doorway of the living room with her hands on her hips and her back hunched as she scowled at Mitsuko, who was looking down at the short table with her hands in her lap and her lips pursed.

“You are in big trouble, Mitsuko,” Taiga said sternly.

Yasuko took her shoulder. “Now, now, let’s just calm down a little...”

But Taiga just huffed through her nose. She pointed outside the room. “Mitsuko, go sit down outside and don’t go anywhere else. I need to talk to Ya-chan.” There wasn’t a sliver of gentleness in her voice. She spoke firmly and clearly.

Mitsuko looked at her mother indignantly. “But—”

“Go!” Taiga yelled, sparing no time to let Mitsuko argue. Mitsuko stood up with a deep frown and watery eyes. She whimpered as she ran past her mother. Then, further along the corridor, she sat herself against the wall and hid her face in her arms. A faint sniffing could be heard, but Taiga simply entered the room with Yasuko, shutting the door behind her.

“Eh... Help yourself to some treats!” Yasuko said cheerfully while sweat ran down her face. She gestured to the biscuits and milk on the table. Taiga simply poured herself a glass of milk and sat at a corner of the table, while Yasuko sat beside her.

Taiga downed the glass of milk like a salaryman would with a shot of liquor. She sighed deeply and wiped her mouth before setting the glass down and gracefully resting her hands in her lap.

“I’m sorry for the trouble, Ya-chan,” she said, fully composed.

“Oh, it wasn’t any trouble at all. It’s been some time since I’ve spoken to Mitsuko like that. I had a lot of fun,” Yasuko spoke casually. However, this response only made Taiga sigh.

“That’s part of the issue...” Taiga grunted. “I was supposed to be working from home today but Mitsuko ended up giving me a heart attack.”

“You know how kids are.” Yasuko took a sip from her cup. “Mitsuko’s been telling me about how scary the trip here was. The trains were crowded so she had a hard time focusing on where she was going. She said she got lost along the way too.”

“I can’t believe she remembered the way here. That girl is so unpredictable...” Taiga looked her mother-in-law straight in the eyes. “So what else did she talk about? Did she mention anything about school?”

“I can say for certain that she is way too invested in the love lives of her teachers,” Yasuko said in jest. Taiga held her cup tightly.

“What about her classmates? Did she say anything about them?”

“Hm...” Yasuko placed a finger on her lip as she pondered. “No, I don’t remember hearing anything. What about her classmates?”

Taiga sighed. “Her classmates have been giving her trouble at school.”

“Another bullying case?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘another’. The bullying’s never gone away in the first place, but...” Taiga started swirling her cup around. “She’s been less cheery at home lately.”

“Did the bullying get worse?”

“No. At least, I don’t think that’s the case. It might have to do with you no longer being around to comfort her.”

“She still hasn’t adjusted yet, huh?”

Taiga rested her elbow on the table. “I was hoping she could talk to me or Ryuuji about it, but she hasn’t been truthful about anything that’s happened at school. I mean, it’s easy to hear about what goes on at school from her sisters. After all, Haruko is an honest girl and Katsuko is a blabbermouth. But Mitsuko always tries to keep things to herself.”

“Poor thing...” Yasuko mumbled.

“I wanted to know... Does she ever talk about bullying with you, Ya-chan?”

Ya-chan’s eyes shifted away so she could recount all the times she’d spoken with her granddaughter. Once it came back to her, her gaze returned to Taiga.

“She has, a few times. Usually, when something bad happened in school, she’d come to me and we’d do a number of things. Sometimes she’d just want to cry, sometimes she’d ask for advice, otherwise we’d just talk about other things to make her happy. She’s quite easy to read about these kinds of things.”

“Maybe for you.” Taiga chuffed. “I was hoping after you moved away, she’d start opening up to me and Ryuuji... Or, at the very least, she’d talk to her sisters about her problems. But in the end, she just became more reclusive.”

“I see...” Yasuko cleared her throat and straightened her posture. “I won’t get in the way of your motherly duties, so I’ll keep my distance and give Mitsuko room to grow. Just come to me if you need any advice.”

“Thank you, Ya-chan.”

Taiga left the room to attend to her daughter sobbing in the corridor. Tears were flowing from her eyes and she had wrinkled eyebrows. The bottom half of her face was covered by her arms as she sat with her knees up.

Yasuko stood in the doorway as she watched Taiga handle her daughter from afar. She knelt beside the little girl and took her soft face to rub off her tears with her thumbs. Mitsuko was still sniffing profusely, her face completely red from sobbing. She looked at her mother’s young face. What was once a fierce glare had turned into a gentle, remorseful gaze. Despite that, she continued to whimper, her lips quivering. Yasuko listened to her daughter-in-law’s gentle voice.

“Hey, hey, Mitsuko. It’s okay now. I’m sorry for shouting. I didn’t want to, but I was still so scared... But I’m fine now, Mitsuko. I was never angry at you. I was just worried after you’d gone and run off on your own...”

Taiga wrapped her arms around her daughter’s shoulders and pulled her into her chest, letting her sob into her shirt. She soothingly stroked her daughter’s hair.

“Mitsuko... Promise me you won’t come here on your own again, alright? What you did was really dangerous. What if something happened to you and Mom or Dad wasn’t there to help? If you want to talk to Ya-chan, then let’s find a safer way to do it, okay?”

Mitsuko nodded quietly in her mother’s chest. There wouldn’t be any more surprise visits from her after that.

\*\*\*

“Ueeehh...”

It was another night at Okonomiyaki and Benzaiten Heaven. Yasuko looked at herself shamefully in front of the locker room mirror.

“I really need to take more initiative with the laundry... I can’t believe I forgot to wash all my work clothes...”

Yasuko had donned an old, tight pink dress that she had worn during her days as a hostess. She tugged on its bust, which clung to her F-cup bosoms and emphasised their round shape. The bust had a huge split in the middle, revealing most of her cleavage. The figure of her wide hips and supple butt became as clear as day as the dress wrapped tightly around them. The dress barely covered her soft cushion-like thighs. She couldn’t find her old black tights either, so she was walking around with her legs bare, exposed to the cold air.

The attire was deeply unprofessional for a woman like her. Even the name tag clipped to her chest was crooked. However, with this store's ties to Yasuko's old workplace, this attire was only barely appropriate. It's not like there was anyone there to berate her about it either. She was the shift manager after all.

"There's no point worrying about it now. Let's just get the night over with."

Yasuko quickly adjusted her hair while she left the locker room. She immediately crossed paths with Taku, with two large boxes sitting between his hands and his chin.

"Oh, Yasu—" However, when he spotted her, he stopped in his tracks and looked at her curiously. "Wait, is that what you're wearing for work? I thought you were going to change."

"Sorry, Ta-kun. This is all I've got for tonight," Yasuko said while she tried to pull her dress lower. But her efforts were instantly undone as the dress climbed back up her thighs.

"Whatever, it's fine for work. It's just..." Taku's cheeks turned rose red as his eyes bashfully looked away. "I really like how you look in it."

"Oh?~" Yasuko smirked. She rested her hand on his shoulder. "Do you want to go somewhere after work or are we heading straight to your place? Hm?" She hummed.

"Ah, well..." Taku chuckled, but he immediately shook his head and composed himself. "Wait, let's talk about that later! The store's full of customers and there's still a few tables waiting to be served."

"Oh, right!"

The couple hurriedly separated to return to their work. Yasuko swiped a few dishes sitting at the kitchen window and served them to the hungry patrons that ordered them. With her colleagues being less experienced than she was, Yasuko became the fastest server there.

After serving a few tables, there was one particular table that caught her attention.

"Oh, Inage-san! You're back!" Yasuko exclaimed while setting down the drinks and dishes at the table. The same group of older men had returned.

"To think I'd have Takasu-san as my server! Oh, I'm in heaven!" Inage said. The group of men guffawed. During his friends' laughing fit, Inage suddenly stopped and scanned Yasuko's body. "Oh my, you look dashing today, Takasu-san!"

"Eh... I don't usually wear this to work." Yasuko scratched her head.

"You should wear it more often!" Inage squinted his eyes and looked closer at Yasuko's dress. Well, he was actually staring at her breasts, but there wasn't any difference. "Wait, I remember this dress! This was what you wore when you were going by Mirano!"

"I suppose it is," Yasuko said while she ran her hand through her blonde hair.

Inage clasped his hands together like a beggar. “Hey, if it isn’t too much trouble, could you show me and my buddies another act by Mirano-chan? For old times’ sake!”

“Eheh... I don’t know. I put that name behind me a long time ago.”

“Come on, Takasu-san! It’ll be fun, I promise!” Inage continued to egg her on.

“Yeah, let’s do it, Takasu-san!” One of his friends added.

Yasuko sighed. “Alright, then.”

She cleared her throat and composed herself to set the stage for her Mirano act. Then, she took a deep breath.

Yasuko bent forward with her hands on her lap, letting her breasts droop downward, letting the men see more of her cleavage. She looked at Inage with gentle eyes and a soft smile, the light reflecting off her smooth skin giving her an angelic face.

“How was everything at work today, Inage-san?” She spoke with the same submissive voice she’d use when speaking to a small child.

“Woah...” Inage started to blush as he stared into Yasuko’s sweet eyes. He was at a loss for words. He was filled with an immense nostalgia as he recalled the time he spent rambling about his divorce to Mirano. Then, when Yasuko chuckled and winked at him, he felt an open smile stretch across his face.

“Wah...” Inage’s friends seemed just as amazed by Yasuko’s performance as Mirano. However, it wasn’t over yet. Yasuko took the bottle of liquor sitting on the table and started filling all the men’s glasses.

“Take it easy, okay? I’m sure you’ve all had a hard day at work. Please, have a drink.”

“Waaaah!” The crowd went wild. Yasuko gave a deep bow, then a curtsy, before turning away to serve the other tables. “Amazing! Nothing short of amazing, Mirano-chan!” The men applauded Yasuko’s performance. Hearing the men shower her in praises gave her a warm feeling in her heart. Facing away from the men, she smiled with her rosy cheeks. She giggled to herself quietly as she went to collect more dishes to serve.

*It’s been a while since I’ve had fun at work like that...*

Yasuko sat in her living room, still in her pajamas. It was early in the afternoon and Yasuko was helping herself to a bowl of fresh cut fruit. While she looked through the window at the birds flying past the trees, her mother entered the room wearing outdoor clothing. She joined Yasuko at the table to have some cut fruit. Yasuko had also caught sight of a document that Sonoko had set on the table.

“Hey, Mom, where did you go just now?” She asked curiously.



“I just went to the doctor to get an examination. He said I need to start eating healthier and working out again,” Sonoko answered.

“Why’s that?”

“Ah, well. Your mother’s been a little irresponsible with her eating habits for the past few months. And I haven’t been exercising as much since your father fell ill. Now I’m slightly obese again. Hehe...” She chuckled bashfully. “If I don’t get myself in shape again, I might no longer be in remission.”

Yasuko swallowed the piece of apple in her mouth. “Wait, your diabetes can come back?” She looked at her mother, baffled.

“Of course it can. Have you forgotten?”

“I thought when the doctor said you were fine all those years ago, we’d be done with it! I didn’t think we’d have to deal with it again!” Yasuko cried out shakily.

Sonoko flinched when her daughter raised her voice. She calmly flicked her hand. “Oh, calm down, Yasuko. You don’t have to worry about it. This is something I can handle myself. I’ve still got time to get myself back into shape.”

Yasuko’s hand rested on the table. “But... You’re sick.” She balled it up into a fist. “Just like Dad.” She clenched it tightly.

Sonoko simply shrugged and placed her hand on her daughter’s shoulder, looking her in the eyes to give it to her straight. “You’re exaggerating, Yasuko. This is in no way as bad as something like a stroke.”

She raised her chest high and placed her fists on her hips. “Let me tell you, back when I first got diagnosed, the neighbourhood moms called me the next Japanese Olympic gold medalist!” She pumped her fist at her daughter, glaring at her with overwhelming confidence. “The law might call me a senior citizen, but I’m not a dinosaur like your father is... Well, I am at the age where I’m vulnerable to this sort of thing, but still!”

Despite Sonoko’s bravado, Yasuko just couldn’t match it. She simply turned her head to the window and bit her lip. It really was coming to her. The fact that her parents might not be around for long. They’d become old and fragile. She’d spent so much time worrying about her father, but after hearing the state of her mother’s health, more pressure was added.

She sighed deeply. She’d been given another terrible truth to accept. Her eyes became watery, which she ensured her mother couldn’t see. However, she didn’t stand a chance against Sonoko’s motherly instincts, as she could immediately tell how Yasuko was feeling. Sonoko started stroking her daughter’s back, which soothed her a little.

“Hey, have a little faith in me, Yasuko. I’m not going anywhere, you know. I’m putting in the work to stay as healthy as I can to continue being with you, just like your father is with his recovery. Don’t worry about us so much, alright?”

Yasuko sniffled. Then, she turned to her mother with a plastered-on smile before giving her an affirmative nod. Sonoko returned the smile before standing up and pumping her fists. She furrowed her brows intimidatingly as she shouted with her chest.

“I’m starting my workout right away! I’ll go for a run, then I’ll hit the gym. After that, I’ll grab some groceries before I head home.” She walked to and stood in the doorway before turning to her daughter one last time. “I’m getting changed. Take care of your father while I’m away, alright?” Finally, she waved at Yasuko before walking out. “Have fun at work!” She said as she left her daughter’s sight.

Yasuko’s bright smile quickly fell apart into a frown. All her mother’s gentle words were obsolete, as she had already accepted the current state of affairs. It was almost time for her parents to leave. She huffed before stuffing her face with another piece of fruit.

*Have fun at work, huh?*

It was another night at Okonomiyaki and Benzaiten Heaven. Kurasawa Taku, with the help of some young colleagues, nonchalantly performed the same song and dance of setting up the tables before opening the store. While he wiped the table, the chime of the front door’s bell rang in his ear. He lifted his head to look at who had just entered.

*Huh?*

“Aaah... The train was so crowded tonight...”

Taku’s eyes widened. Yasuko strolled into the store with a natural smile on her face. But there was something off about her. *Is it her hair?* The colour and the way it was done looked about the same. *Maybe her dress?* Even though it accentuated her curves, it was a dress he commonly saw her wear to work. It even had her name tag on it. But he seemed to be getting closer. Even his colleagues were looking in that area, so he squinted his eyes.

*No, wait...* When he looked closer, it became clear as day.

It wasn’t about what she was wearing.

It was about what she *wasn’t*.

Two little round bumps were poking out of her bust. As Taku looked closer, he noticed Yasuko’s breasts swaying around a lot more. She’d arrived at work without a bra, and her nipples were jutting out. His jaw dropped at the boldness Yasuko was displaying. When he looked around, it seemed his colleagues felt the same.

“Hm? What is it? Is something wrong with my hair?” Yasuko asked cluelessly as she tried straightening her luscious hair out. Everyone looked away, pretending not to notice Yasuko’s drooping, heavy breasts shaking around. *No, she’s not being bold. She’s just being an airhead.* That was the impression she was giving. The room had gone eerily silent. Perhaps it would be better for Yasuko not to panic. She wasn’t violating the dress code, as lax as it is. It wasn’t the first time someone showed up without a bra anyway. Everyone simply continued setting up while Yasuko hummed to herself as she went about her night.

“Hey, hey, she’s coming!” One of Inage’s friends tapped his arm as they looked in the distance. Yasuko was serving tables again. As the men tilted their heads over the table to gaze upon Yasuko’s youthful beauty, their mouths fell agape at the sight of her outfit.

“Oh my...”

“Is she really?”

“We’re so lucky...”

They were tantalized by Yasuko’s outfit that night. Even though she wasn’t showing as much cleavage as before, just the thought of her without a bra made what she wore feel so much more revealing. They couldn’t believe their eyes. As she got closer, Inage’s eyes met hers. They were as dazzling as two gems. He quickly composed himself.

“Hey, act natural, everybody!” Inage told his friends. They immediately glued their butts back to their seats and acted as if they hadn’t been gawking at Yasuko’s bosoms for the past twenty minutes they’d been sitting there.

“Hey, Inage-san! It’s great seeing you become a regular,” Yasuko said cheerily. As Yasuko started setting the dishes onto the table, Inage cleared his throat.

“Takasu-san, I know you’re a little busy, but can we see Mirano-chan again?” He made his request with an ignorant smile.

“Hmm... Okay...” Yasuko said as she set her tray of dishes down and straightened her posture with a smile. Her reluctance was as much of an act as Mirano was.

She stood by the table. All spotlights shined on her. Her shoulders tensed up as she readied herself for her performance. Then, she took a deep bow. The deliberate force of her upper body shifting caused her heavy breasts to sway even harder than before. The lack of bra also created more space for the men to look into her cleavage. There was no doubt that it was a successful trick, as the men’s eyes were glued to them. Finally, she gazed at the men with her adorable puppy dog eyes. “How has your night been? Please tell me all about it...~” she said with a soothing voice.

There wasn't a hint of shame at that table.

"Waaaaaaah!" The men erupted into cheers and applause. Yasuko gave them a friendly smile and resumed her act. As she placed each dish in front of them, she'd give the man she faced an empty compliment, commenting on their face or their attire. It didn't matter whether it was sincere or not. Mirano said something nice to them. That was enough to rile them up.

"Thank you, thank you, Mirano-chan!"

"You're the best! We'll definitely come here again!"

"Come back with this outfit tomorrow, alright?"

Yasuko left the table with an empty tray and a bright smile. As the distance between her and the men grew, sweat started to run down her head. She fanned herself with the tray and let out a deep sigh. *I got way too bold that time!* Yasuko thought. *I didn't actually flash them, did I?* She felt her shoulders grow heavy after putting on that act. She had walked away from that table with less energy than she had before she approached it. However, despite the exhaustion, the cheers of the men brought her some amusement.

Yasuko needed a break. To her pleasure, she found out it was just time for that when she glanced at the clock. She wandered into the back of the store, hoping to reach the break room. However, she stopped when she spotted Taku leaning against the wall in the corridor with his arms crossed. Their eyes met.

"Oh, Yasuko."

"Hey, Ta-kun!" She said casually.

"Yasuko, I... I wanted to talk to you about something."

"About what?"

"About..." He gestured to the outside. "Those men you've been talking to. And that whole..." He waved his hands around Yasuko. "Mirano... Thing..."

"Ah, right. We should probably talk about that, shouldn't we? What I'm doing is quite risque, and we're dating so I need your approval..."

"I'm okay with it," Taku said firmly, causing Yasuko's eyes to light up. He started scratching his head. "I mean, I guess it's a little weird that you're displaying yourself like that to other men, but... As long as a good distance is kept between you and them, and you continue keeping yourself for me, I'm okay with it. So act as wild as you like, wear whatever you want, just don't let them touch you... And don't go home with any of them."

Yasuko chuckled. "Thank you, Ta-kun. I'll keep my distance, I promise." She took Taku's hand and grasped it gently. "You won't have to worry about a single thing. You mean

more to me than any other man does. I would never do anything that would break your trust. It's just..." Her eyes drifted off to the side. "I'm having fun being Mirano. It feels nice hearing their cheering. I've been thinking of continuing like this. It could be my new role here at the store."

"Alright..." Taku took Yasuko's hands and grasped them too. "If that's what you want, then I'll cheer you on." They shared a warm smile with each other. However, when Taku's eyes dropped to her chest, his face straightened.

"But I also have to address... that." Taku lowered his and Yasuko's hands. "This doesn't have anything to do with Mirano, but are you sure it's a good idea to be going around without a bra? This isn't about the dress code, I'm just a little worried."

"I actually felt quite comfortable letting my chest go free for a bit."

"Oh, is that so..."

Yasuko nodded. Suddenly, her eyes lit up again. Maybe it was just the rush of being Mirano still inside her, but a rather interesting thought had popped into her mind. "Maybe I could change your mind." She smirked.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"You're on break, right?"

"Uh, yea— Oh!" Yasuko suddenly pulled Taku's hand and brought him along the corridor. She entered the shift managers' office, where two desks sat on both sides of the room. There were sofas and coffee tables, too. The room acted as a second break room exclusive for the shift managers to invite anyone they'd like inside. It was also the room that happened to have no cameras installed inside it.

Yasuko pushed Taku into the room and locked the door behind her.

"Hey, Yasuko, what's this all about?" Taku asked.

He heard a little rustle behind him. He started turning around.

"WOAH!" He recoiled backward as Yasuko stood in the very centre of his line of sight. She was clasping at the fabric around the top of her dress and had pulled it down. There was no denying it. She wasn't hiding it anymore. She really wasn't wearing a bra. And only Taku got that confirmation. Nobody else could see what happened behind that door.

"You wanted me to keep myself just for you, right?"

"W-w-wait, what are you doing—Aaah!"

"Well? Don't keep me waiting! Our break isn't long, you know!"

"Wh-what would the higher-ups think!?"

"The higher-ups won't have to know!"

“B-but... There wasn’t anything down there either!?”

Twenty minutes passed before the door to the office finally unlocked. Yasuko adjusted her dress and wiped the sweat off her forehead as she stood in the doorway. Her heart was racing. The adrenaline was coursing through her veins.

“Aaah... I think I’m ready to serve more tables!” She said energetically. She turned around and leaned on the side of the doorway, looking at Taku mischievously. He, too, was heavily panting. The button and zipper on his pants had been undone. The buttons around his chest were undone as well. His glasses were left crooked and his entire body was strewn on one of the sofas.

“Hey, let’s go for another round at your place later, okay?”

“Uh... Haah... Yeah...”

Yasuko winked and waved at Taku, who had not moved an inch. She marched down the corridor, ready to return to work. This was the most bold she’d ever acted at work, and she was full of energy. However, as her excitement died down, her mind wandered.

*Mom and Dad probably wouldn’t approve of this.*

They’d probably give her a stern scolding if they’d ever found out how she was acting at work. But she quickly brushed the thought away. She had no reason to even consider it. There was going to come a day when they wouldn’t be around to scold her or tell her what to do. She’d already accepted that. But now that she had found what sounded like her calling, she felt less afraid, like she didn’t need their guidance anymore.

Perhaps it was time for her to let go of her parents after all.

\*\*\*

*Brrrt...*

“Nnngh...”

On a normal, sunny afternoon, Yasuko’s slumber was disturbed by the vibrating of her phone. She sat up from her futon, her hair strewn all over her face like vines, with one of the straps of her light yellow camisole falling from her shoulder to her elbow. She rubbed her eyes and stretched her arms before looking at her phone.

“Eh?” The screen displayed a few new messages from three unknown numbers. Taiga had also messaged her as well.

**Taiga-chan**

Ya-chan, I've bought the girls their own little phones and given your number to them so they can message you.

**Sent at 6:54 AM (Read)**

I thought it would suit them since they liked going out on their own a lot. But these ones have child protections installed, obviously. They've got Ryuuji and I's numbers too.

**Sent at 6:47 AM (Read)**

**Taiga-chan**

Mitsuko was especially excited to receive this. Send her a message once in a while, alright?

**Sent at 6:48 AM (Read)**

Yasuko chuckled at the thought of her granddaughters having a direct line of communication to her. It would be like having them right beside her without needing them to travel the distance. She immediately added the new numbers to her contacts. The girls had even set their profile pictures as cute cartoon characters.

**Haru-chan**

Good morning Ya-chan.

**Sent at 6:54 AM (Read)**

Today Dad made fried eggs and sausages for breakfast. What did you have? Did your mom make it or do you make it yourself?

**Sent at 6:54 AM (Read)**

**Yasuko**

Good morning, Haru-chan! I'm usually asleep so I miss breakfast a lot. But my mom still makes lunch for me before I go to work.

**Sent at 2:21 PM (Delivered)**

Yasuko then took a look at Katsuko's messages. Her messages were sent at around the same time as Haruko's were, but only the first was a text message which read "hello

ya-chan”. The rest of her messages were just pictures she had taken with her phone camera. There was a photo of her with her tongue sticking out, a closeup of Haruko’s face, a closeup of Taiga’s irritated face, then her holding up a lizard as long as her forearm next to her face. Yasuko giggled at her granddaughter’s cheekiness. Finally, she took a look at Mitsuko’s messages. She was the one that sent her the most.

**Micchan**

Hello Ya-chan! Mom gave me this phone just now. She said I could message you whenever I wanted, but I had to wait for you to read and respond to them. I’m getting ready for school now, so I can’t message you yet. Mom also said I’m not allowed to take out my phone in school because it would be a distraction. Also, I don’t like waiting when I send messages. I might forget that I sent them. When can I start messaging you? I need to tell you something. I know you said I shouldn’t be following people secretly, but I found this by accident! There’s two teachers that have fallen in love with each other, but they’re both boys. Is that allowed? Mom said it is, but some of the kids in my class think it’s weird and gross. I want to hear what you think.

**Sent at 6:57 AM (Read)**

**Yasuko**

Hello, Micchan! You can message me when I’m getting ready for work. I usually leave home at 7 PM. Just send me a message once you get back from school! Also, I don’t think your teachers are weird at all! They can love whoever they’d like.

**Sent at 2:25 PM (Delivered)**

Hearing her granddaughters’ thoughts never ceased to amuse her. It seemed reading their messages even energised Yasuko, as she was now fully awake and ready to start her day. She swiped her covers off her body and left her room with her head held high.

It was time for Mirano to make her second debut.



“Eh? You ordered more food?” Yasuko, in a scanty red dress, looked at the usual group of men she had been serving with awe. Inage was giving her a friendly wave. She quickly set the dishes onto their table while they gave her wide grins.

“We were thinking of staying until closing time!” One of Inage’s friends exclaimed, cheerily raising a spatula for flipping okonomiyaki in the air.

“Hey, Mirano-chan!” Inage said, beckoning Yasuko to come closer. He shuffled to the side and patted the empty space on the seat next to him. “Why don’t you join us?”

She glanced around. It wasn’t far from closing time. The store was almost empty too. Then, she looked at Taku, who was standing by the side and watching the store. When his eyes met hers, she nudged her head towards Inage. Taku nodded and continued to watch. He’d look at Inage’s table more often while she helped herself to the seat.

“I can’t believe it! We’ve got Mirano-chan sitting at our table!”

“This is a cause for celebration!”

“Yeah!”

One of the men poured a drink for her. Together, they raised their glasses in the air and shouted, “Cheers!”

“Nishio-san, how’re those new hires doing for you?” Inage asked one of his friends.

“They’re a lot of work, I’ll say! Kids these days can’t even look a customer in the eye when they take their order!” Nishio said, slamming his glass onto the table. “They won’t even look me in the eye either. I don’t even think they know what I look like!”

Everyone at the table guffawed at Nishio’s sharing, amused by its ridiculousness. Yasuko, too, was giggling along. Swirling her drink in her hand, she opened her mouth.

“You know, I’ve had my fair share of difficult newbies. One time, there was—”

“Oh! You know what, Nishio-san? You should definitely...”

Yasuko recoiled as one of Inage’s friends interrupted her. The whiplash of being silenced so suddenly caused her tongue to tie up. As Inage’s friend rambled on to Nishio about his new hires, Yasuko plastered on a soft smile and gazed idly into the whirlpool forming in her cup as she swirled it around.

“Oh! Mirano-chan, you mentioned you were the shift manager here, right?” Another one of Inage’s friends asked her.

“Yeah, I am!” She said cheerfully, slightly hopeful to be able to engage in some friendly conversation.

“Let me tell you, I own a startup company and I’ve got tons of great experience managing one. There was one time when...” The man went on a tangent about his company.

As a woman with plenty of work experience, Yasuko occasionally tried to open her mouth to chime in, but the man gave her no room to speak, limiting her words to short phrases.

“Is that so?”

“That’s interesting...”

“I see...”

At some point, she started cycling through the same three monotonous phrases and the man wouldn’t even notice. As the conversation went on, Inage placed his hand on Yasuko’s shoulder which was right next to him. It wasn’t a new feeling to her with how common it was to see Inage at the bar she used to work at, so she didn’t react. However, sitting in that seat and getting talked over by the men made her remember what it meant to be hostess. Listening to men talk about themselves was a part of the job. *Well, as long as I’m entertaining them, I think I’m fine like this. It’s not my first time, after all...*

“See you tomorrow, Mirano-chan!”

Yasuko waved as the group of men walked away from the store, through the crowded city streets. The lights in the store were shut off before Taku exited through the glass door and locked it behind him.

“Hooh! I’m exhausted! Those men were talking for hours!” Yasuko said while she stretched her body.

“Are you alright getting touched on the shoulder like that?” Taku asked.

“It’s not the first time. It’s just my shoulder, anyway. Inage-san has felt my butt when I was working at the bar, but I don’t plan on letting him do that now.” Yasuko felt her shoulders drop from how heavy they were. “Aaaah... I’m so tired.”

“Should we go somewhere before we head to my place?”

*My place.* Yasuko smirked at those words. “No, let’s go straight there.”

“Alright, then—Woah!”

She grabbed Taku’s hand and forcefully dragged him through the crowded streets, the couple giggling over the sounds of the cars on the road. It wasn’t long before they arrived at Taku’s apartment complex. After Taku unlocked the door, Yasuko shoved Taku through and locked the door behind her. She pulled him by the collar to his bedroom and threw him onto the bed. Taku laid there in a daze with his glasses crooked as Yasuko dropped her dress on the floor and pounced on him like a tiger.

“Mm... Mm! Mmh!” Like a starving animal finally catching its prey, Yasuko pressed her lips against Taku’s. Everything happened so quickly for him. His eyes lit up while Yasuko

gripped his face tightly and pulled him in. It took a few seconds for him to realise what she was doing. In an attempt to stay on key with her, he wrapped his hands around her bare back to hold her body against his. But while he could move his body, Yasuko had assumed control over his face, kissing deeply without leaving any patch of skin on his lips untouched by her saliva. She had taken that part of his body all for herself.

A few minutes passed. Their clothes were strewn all over the room, including some of Taku's pillows. The bed was trembling. The weight of the couple's romantic action created fast, heavy creaks from the bed. If Yasuko were any rougher or heavier, the legs would surely break. Taku could be heard giggling while she had her way with him.

"My goodness... Yasuko, you are out of control!"

Finally, after going at it for over half an hour, Yasuko was satisfied. She was pressing her bosoms against Taku's bare chest before she lifted her back. Sitting on his hips, she looked up to the ceiling with an open smile.

"Aaah..."

She let out a relieving sigh, letting all the tension float out of her body. Then, she climbed off Taku's body and tucked herself under the covers. She snuggled up beside him, pulling in his arm between her soft breasts, then closed her eyes gently with a pleased smile. Taku, however, was paralysed. He was panting and looking at the ceiling in shock.

"Yasuko... I'm really sore," he uttered.

"Hm? Make sure you're well by tomorrow so we can do this again," Yasuko chuckled softly, already falling asleep next to him. Seeing how comfortable she was, Taku decided not to argue. He simply sighed and shut his eyes as well. The couple fell into a deep slumber beside each other until sunrise, where Yasuko would return home to continue her rest.

"Haaaaah..."

Yasuko rose from her futon again, stretching her arms in the air with a deep yawn. It was time for her to prepare for another night of her new, unofficial job as Mirano. She started her day with lunch while she messaged Mitsuko on her phone. Once evening arrived, she left her parents' home for work. With her new role as Mirano, her routine for day-to-day life began to change.

Yasuko found herself leaving work more exhausted than she usually did. She'd constantly expend her energy without any breaks to entertain the men until closing time. It took a toll on her, but for a while, she was able to endure. Thankfully, her nights with Taku

acted as a means to restore her energy. Then, she returned home to start her day all over again. It was simple, but pleasing. At least, it started out that way.

As she sat at the table of men talking over her and waited until it was time to please them, she felt a terrible boredom. It took her a few days to realise that sitting at the table and idly swirling her drink around wasn't very fulfilling. Of course, the men were completely oblivious to this. She considered leaving the table. However, it took her another few days to actually do that. She still wanted to be an entertainer, after all.

"Oh, Mirano-chan? Where are you going?" Inage asked when she stood up from the seat beside him.

"Just going to get some work done. I'm still a shift manager here, you know," Yasuko pumped her fists. "But don't worry, I'll still Mirano-chan until closing time!"

"Ah, I see." Inage waved at Yasuko as she left to start wiping tables. Since it was almost closing time, most of the tables were left empty with dirty griddles and sauce stains. Some of her colleagues had already started table cleaning, too.

"Hey! Mirano-chan's back!" One of Inage's friends exclaimed when Yasuko approached their table with a wet cloth and a spray bottle. She gave them a friendly smile before turning around to clean the table next to them. However, as she swiped the cloth across the sanitised table, one of the men's voices reached her ears.

"You've got a nice ass, Mirano-chan."

Yasuko froze.

"And she's in her 40s. Can you believe that?"

"Four grandkids, too. But with hips like that, I'd believe she had four kids herself."

As she stood there, bent over the table with her back facing the men, she felt an uncomfortable ache in her chest. However, it wasn't just from the uncouth remarks, but her inability to say anything about them. Mirano was an entertainer. Speaking up against a bunch of men just "having some fun" would go against that. With a nervous chill down her spine, she slowly stood up and gave the men a toothy green.

"Uh... I'm flattered," she mumbled before moving to the other side of the table. The men gave her friendly smiles back while they watched her continue wiping the table.

"Ah, they sway quite nicely, don't they?"

"Mirano-chan was one of the biggest back in the day," Inage added.

Hearing their comments, Yasuko glanced at the men and realised they were gazing at her chest, too. The ache in her chest stung harder, causing her to hasten her wiping. Once the

table was sparkling clean, she picked up the cleaning supplies and briskly walked to the next dirty table, which was farther away and out of their sight.

Once she was there, she heard the men start talking about work again. A wave of relief washed over her when she realised she had lost their attention. However, after an interaction like that, a difficult question popped into her head. *I've had a job exactly like this before. Why am I having such a hard time now?*

The sun's morning rays shone in Taku's eyes as its light pierced the curtains and filled the room. He groaned as he turned his body towards Yasuko lying beside him and massaged his lower back. He was still sore from last night after they made love to each other. While he faced Yasuko, her eyes slowly opened as well.

"Good morning, Yasuko..." Taku said tiredly as she sat up and rubbed her eye. However, once she was awake, Taku noticed her sitting there in an irritated befuddlement. It was 7 AM, two hours after the first train had started running, which Yasuko usually took home. But that wasn't what Yasuko was concerned about.

She just wasn't satisfied from last night.

Yasuko turned and locked eyes with Taku. His eyes widened with curiosity.

"Hm? What is it, Yasuko?" He asked. But she didn't say a word. Instead, she crawled over to him and grabbed his face like she did last night. She climbed over his body and sat on his hips. Then, she closed her eyes and forced her lips against his. "Mmmh!" Taku jolted from Yasuko's sudden advancement. She pulled her face away to catch her breath, giving him a chance to speak. "Y-Yasuko!? What are you doing?"

"What? We usually do second rounds," she said hastily.

"Yeah, but—" Yasuko pushed her lips into Taku's face again. "Okay, okay, fine..." He spoke while she kissed his lips incessantly. He wrapped his arms around her body and they connected their lips like train couplers. Even though his body was sore, he just couldn't refuse Yasuko's romantic advances.

"Hey, Mirano-chan! We'd like to order some more!" One of Inage's friends shouted, waving at Yasuko who was serving another table a few meters away.

"I'll be there in a minute!" Yasuko shouted back as she walked off hastily with an empty tray in hand. She quickly swiped off the beads of sweat running down her face. The store had a full house that night. She approached the men's table with a pencil and notebook in hand. "Sorry for the wait, boys."

“Ah, it’s fine. The other servers tried to take our order but we turned them away,” Inage said calmly.

“Huh? Why?” Yasuko was absolutely baffled.

“Because we’re here to see Mirano-chan, of course!” A man at the table behind her said. She turned around with confusion, not recognising the man’s face. All the men at the table were grinning with excitement.

“Wait, are you with him?” She said, pointing at Inage.

“Word gets around!” Inage chuckled.

“Oh... You don’t plan on bringing anyone else, do you, Inage-san?” She asked, hiding the sarcasm behind her soft, feminine voice.

“No, no, these are all the friends I’ve got... In this area, at least.”

“Is that so?” Yasuko muttered. Either way, closing time was about to become a lot more noisier. She took a deep breath and plastered on a bright smile for her growing audience, pushing away any bad thoughts in her head.

“Hey, hey, Ta-kun!”

Yasuko raised a can of beer to Taku’s face. The couple stood inside the Lawson they usually passed by on their way to Taku’s place.

“Let’s do it while we’re wasted!” Yasuko cheered. She happily looked at the can’s sleek design and felt the ice cold aluminium in her hand. “I haven’t gotten the chance to have some alcohol since my granddaughters were born, but I think it’s time I get back into it. What do you think, Ta-kun?”

“I don’t mind. Just be gentle, alright? I don’t want to wake up with soreness *and* a hangover. I wouldn’t be able to get up from bed,” Taku said sternly.

“Alright! Teehee...” Yasuko scratched her head cheekily.

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“Uwah!”

Yasuko suddenly rose from Taku’s bed, covered in sweat. She panted heavily as if she had just woken up from a nightmare. She looked at the clock. It was 11 AM. She would usually be asleep in her futon by then. When she left the bedroom, she saw Taku in the bathroom wiping his mouth while he sat in front of the toilet.

He sighed deeply before Yasuko knelt behind him and hugged his back. She rested her chin on his shoulder and rocked his body gently.

“How are you feeling, Ta-kun?”

“My head still hurts a little... But I think I’m well enough to start the day.”

Yasuko’s hand moved from the top of his chest down to his abs. “Can we go for another round? I need it to fix my hangover...”

Taku turned around. “S-seriously?”

Yasuko nodded. He took a second to ponder. He was exhausted and had a terrible hangover, but again, he found himself tempted by Yasuko’s body. The warm hug she was giving him convinced him even more. She was irresistible, his only concern was whether he could handle her.

“Fine, let’s do it...”

The couple stood up and returned to the bedroom.

“Cheers!”

The group of men happily raised their glasses in the air and clinked their glasses together. Yasuko, however, kept hers at her chest. She wore an irritated frown as she got sandwiched between Inage and his friend at their table, both of them holding onto her shoulders as their drunken selves obliviously swayed from side to side. *Please, let me go... Go home already...*

The days and nights started to blur.

Yasuko sluggishly woke up in Taku’s bed, the afternoon sun lighting up the room. Taku was still asleep beside her. Cans of beer were stacked by the foot of the nightstand. The clock told her it was 1 PM. Seeing how late it was, she gasped and quickly crawled out of bed, picking her clothes off the floor and hastily putting them on. She left Taku’s apartment with a terrible headache.

“Yasuko? Why’re you home so late?”

“Hmm?”

Yasuko stood by the front door, trying to pull off her shoes. Her hangover made it difficult to get her finger into the gap in her shoe to pull it off. Her eyes were half open and her body swung around as if an imaginary gust of wind were blowing onto her. It took her a second to notice her mother wearing a cooking apron standing in front of her.

“Oh, I was sleeping at Ta-kun’s place... Is lunch ready?”

“It’ll be ready in a moment. Just go and get changed while you wait.”

Yasuko walked through the old corridors of her parents' home, rubbing her eyes. She approached the open door to her parents' bedroom. Just before she could pass it by, she stopped when she heard an old, stern voice called out to her from inside.

"Yasuko? Is that you?"

She stepped back to find her father sitting up in bed; one of the rare times she'd find him awake. The lights were off, with just the afternoon sun to gently light up the room. But it was too dark for Yasuko to discern whether he had gotten better or worse.

"Where have you been all morning? You'd usually be in your room by then."

Yasuko leaned against the doorway and pinched her eyes. "Oh, sorry, Dad. I've just got a little hangover."

"Is that why you've been returning home so late? Come on, Yasuko. You know how much I've told you to go easy on the alcohol..." Seiji scolded her. She leaned her head against the doorframe and stared at the ceiling. "Well, it's been a while since I've gotten the chance to talk with you about that. How's work been, Yasuko?"

Yasuko huffed. "Same old, same old." Her lips quivered.

"It doesn't sound like 'same old, same old' to me. Did something happen at the store? Or did you and Kurasawa-kun get into an argument?"

"Dad, I'm in my 40s. You don't have to poke in your nose into everything I do," Yasuko chuffed. Her eyes avoided her parents' room while her father spoke to her. Her hangover caused her to wince.

"Hmm?" Seiji started to get suspicious. He leaned forward. "Your mother was starting to get worried, you know. It's not like you to get drunk like that."

Yasuko couldn't bear to hear another word of her father's voice. She looked him straight in the eyes. "I can get drunk whenever I want! I don't need your opinion on what I do in my free time!" She yelled like a bratty child before leaving the doorway.

"Oi! Yasuko! I wasn't done talking!"

Yasuko blocked Seiji's calls out of her head. She marched along while she shook her head. The pain of her hangover made her more prone to emotional outbursts, but that wasn't the cause of her tantrum. *How's work been?* She felt tears well up at the thought that there was going to be a time when she wouldn't hear that question from her father's mouth again. She didn't want to think of that at all, but seeing her father's face kept bringing the thought back. Perhaps it would be best if she didn't talk to him again.

"Aaah!"



Yasuko had let out a shriek as one of the Inage's friends spilled liquor onto her glittery skintight dress. "Hey! This dress was expensive!" She cried. At closing time, Inage apologised to her profusely for the mess. With a straight face, Yasuko apologised for her outburst. The two bowed to each other and went their separate ways.

"Nnngh..."

Yasuko and Taku groaned while they laid in bed. She was hugging his arm and nuzzling his shoulder. Her clothes were tumbling inside his apartment's dryer. She wore one of his T-shirts as a substitute. It was large enough to reach her thighs. Taku slowly opened his eyes and turned to his clock. It was 2 PM.

"Nn... Shouldn't you be on the way home by now?" He said weakly with eyebags on his face. Even with the hours of sleep, he seemed exhausted.

"I don't feel like going home today..." She said, her face buried in his shoulder.

"Don't you need to get changed?"

"I can just wear last night's outfit..."

"Alright..." Taku stepped out of bed and stretched his arms. He groaned and massaged the back of his neck. "Ugh... My head still hurts..." He then turned to Yasuko. His movements were as slow as a sloth's. "How about I make us some lunch? I'm starving."

"Yahoo..." Yasuko cheered softly, raising her fist to the air slowly before dropping it to the bed. While Taku left her alone in his bedroom, she took a look at her phone. "Ah... It's been a while since I've looked at my messages..." She started scrolling through her contacts. "A few from Mom and Dad... Taiga-chan and Ryuu-chan... Haru-chan, Kacchan and... Huh?" Her eyes widened. "Over a thousand from Micchan... Aah! I completely forgot about her!" She slapped her palm against her forehead.

### **Micchan**

I think Masaki-sensei might be right about Yukina-sensei's weight. Her tummy has gotten so big! She might need to start exercising.

**Sent at 3:13 PM (Read)**

Yasuko scrolled through her messages, occasionally stopping on one of them to read it briefly. Most of the messages were sent around the same time over multiple days and weeks. Mitsuko had gained a habit of messaging her after school.

**Micchan**

Tsuda-sensei yelled at me for drawing in class again. It was a good drawing, but she took it and tore it up in front of everyone. I know I'm supposed to be listening to her, but I wish she waited until after class ended to tear it up.

**Sent at 3:21 PM (Read)**

Yasuko pinched her eyes as she was hit with another stinging pain in her head from her hangover. She skimmed the messages a little faster. The messages were endless.

**Micchan**

Some of the kids in my class stole the melon bread Dad bought for me again. When they gave it back, it looked like someone stepped all over it. They said that babies should eat food they don't have to chew, but the bread didn't taste very good after that. I don't like it when they do that. How do I get them to stop?

**Sent at 3:41 PM (Read)**

Yasuko squinted her eyes as her hangover made her vision blurry. Even though she couldn't see for a moment, she didn't stop scrolling.

**Micchan**

Ya-chan, when are you going to message me again? I really need your help. I don't want my sisters to get into another fight with the other kids, and I don't want to bother Mom and Dad. What am I supposed to do? Please message me Ya-chan. I want the other kids to leave me alone.

**Sent at 3:31 PM (Read)**

None of Mitsuko's words seemed to be going into her head. Yasuko just wanted to reach the end of all of the messages. Fortunately, that was drawing near.

**Micchan**

I drew during class again, but luckily nobody else saw it. One of the kids told Tsuda-sensei I was drawing last time, but this time I finished my drawing. It was a drawing of me, you, Mom and Dad, Haruko and Katsuko. I'm bringing the drawing home. I really like it.

**Sent at 3:21 PM (Read)**

Yasuko sighed when there were no more messages left. She pressed the edge of her phone against her soft cheek as she pondered what she was going to do about Mitsuko's messages. Her eyes drifted off as she was overcome with guilt for not upholding her promise to her granddaughter. However, she didn't feel like there was anything she could do about it, not with her hangover, at least. Either way, she had to send something.

**Yasuko**

Sorry, Micchan! I've been really busy lately, so I won't have the time to read your messages. I hope that things are going well at school. Remember to continue being kind to others like I taught you.

**Sent at 2:34 PM (Delivered)**

With the situation with Mitsuko handled, she huffed and tossed her phone to the side. She left Taku's bed to prepare herself for the day. Her granddaughter became an afterthought in her new life as Mirano. As far as any of her patrons knew, Mirano never had a family worth knowing about. She liked to drink, have sex and entertain men. That was who she was, and that was all there was to her.

"Oi. Yasuko."

"Huh?"

It had been a few days since Yasuko started staying over at Taku's. She'd wear the same outfit for a few nights at a time, occasionally returning home to change. At the moment,

she was standing cluelessly in the entrance of her parents' home, squinting her eyes at the old woman, her mother, standing before her. *Am I still drunk?* She thought.

"What?" Sonoko asked.

"Uh... Well..." Yasuko rubbed her eyes and squinted at her mother again. "What are you wearing, mom?" Sonoko was standing with her hands on her hips while she wore pink sweatbands on her wrists and her head. She also wore a synthetic shirt underneath a discoloured basketball jersey. "Doesn't that shirt belong to Dad?" Yasuko asked.

Sonoko huffed. "Well, Yasuko, because you barely come home anymore, I'm the only one around to look after your father. I prefer working out in the park, but your lack of presence has forced me to do my exercise at home," she said scornfully. "What's gotten into you, Yasuko? Have you been avoiding us again?"

"What? No! It's just, uh... Work's been really tough lately, that's all! And drinking it away just helps. Besides, I've got Ta-kun to help me when I'm in need! So there's no need to worry about me doing anything strange" Yasuko scratched her head and chuckled awkwardly.

"That's not a good thing to do, you know," Sonoko said gravely. "Don't drink just to make yourself feel better. Just come home and talk to us. Your father is asleep now, but he's been wondering where you've been." She crossed her arms and looked Yasuko in the eye.

"Yeah, yeah, I know..." Yasuko swiped her hand as she brushed her mother's words away and stepped into the house. She went about her day without once considering what her mother had said. Sonoko could only stand to the side and sigh.

"Nngh..."

Yasuko trudged into Taku's kitchen wearing nothing but one of his T-shirts. He was at the stove and had just fried some eggs. His hand weakly handled the spatula, gently scooping the egg onto it and slowly moving it to a plate. He'd let his beard grow out, his little hairs poking out of his chin like the pines on a cactus. Yasuko hugged his back, drowsily resting her cheek on it and pressing her bosoms against it.

"Mmh... How long were we at it last night?" She asked.

"Two minutes..." Taku muttered. He leaned against the side of the stove with his head hanging low.

"Huh? Only two?"

"I had to stop when you got too drunk. You weren't responding to anything I was saying, then you passed out." He sighed before rubbing and twisting his neck. "Honestly, as

much as I enjoy making love to you, I'm glad we ended it early. I haven't been sleeping well at all lately." His eyelids hung so low it was as if he were asleep while standing up.

"Is that so..." Yasuko mumbled before slipping off Taku's back and falling to her knees. She peeked around his body and put her fingers into the rim of his shorts, slowly pulling them down.

Taku looked down. "Yasuko... What are you doing?"

"We need to make up for last night..." Yasuko said, still focused on his pants.

"I don't know if I can... It's still really early..."

"Eeh..." Yasuko whined. "But I won't have any energy to work if we don't do it..." Taku's pants dropped to the floor, revealing his boxer briefs. She hugged his legs and rested her face against his butt. "Come on, Taaa-kuun... It'll be quick, I promise..."

Taku pursed his lips as he pondered. As Yasuko continued to whine, he started to smile until he let out a light chuckle. "You really are irresistible, Yasuko..." He turned around and took Yasuko's hands. "Alright, let's do it before the food gets cold."

"Yahoo..." Yasuko cheered and slowly rose and smiled brightly at Taku. She wrapped her arms underneath his armpits and nuzzled against his chest. Taku continued to chuckle. However, his chuckling would suddenly go silent, and a heavy weight was placed on Yasuko's shoulders.

"Huh? Ta-kun?" She felt her knees slowly bending as the weight of Taku's body pushed her down. Finally, her knees reached the floor, Taku's body slumping over her. She held his face in her hands. It was completely flushed, and his breathing was heavy. His forehead was as hot as an ember.

"Oh no... You're burning up!"

Yasuko walked through the bustling city streets underneath the dark blue sky. She approached the store and started unlocking the front door. Some of her coworkers were already there, leaning against the glass and looking at their phones, waiting for work to begin. For the past few days, she had been the only shift manager on duty.

"You know, looking back, I think there were multiple instances where I should've just said no. It wasn't very wise of me to keep going even though I was so tired," Taku said weakly from under his bed covers. Even though he was in no condition to spend time with her, Yasuko continued to stay at his place until the trains started running. He'd given her a spare key. Every time she arrived, she'd find him in bed, resting.

“Hey, if I didn’t have a doctor’s note, would you still ask for sex?”

“Don’t say that, Ta-kun. I’m not like that at all,” Yasuko said as she gloomily stood at his bedside. Taku chuckled as he made light of the consequence of their irresponsibility. Yasuko moved to the other side of the bed and stripped until she was in her lingerie. She slipped underneath the covers and snuggled under Taku’s armpit. It was warm.

“I’m sorry, Ta-kun. I didn’t mean for this to happen,” Yasuko said faintly.

“Don’t worry about it. Happens to the best of us. I think, now that we’re sober, we should just take a step back and breathe.” Taku looked down at Yasuko with a pleasant smile. “Go straight home once the trains start running, alright? And maybe hold off on the alcohol.”

Yasuko nodded silently. Taku gently stroked her arm with his thumb.

“Your mother called me recently, you know. She’s worried about you.”

“I know...” Yasuko whined.

“She also told me... That your father is sick.”

Yasuko’s eyes widened.

“When I heard that, I started to understand why you’ve been acting so strange lately.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Yasuko interrupted.

“Alright, alright... But if you ever want to, you can always come to me about it.”

Yasuko planted her palm over Taku’s face. “Enough. Go to sleep.”

Taku snickered before finally letting the room go silent, letting the couple fall into a slumber. This was how things would continue until Taku recovered from his fever.

“Hey, why don’t you smile a little more, Mirano-chan?” One of Inage’s friends jeered as he raised a glass of liquor into the air. Even though Yasuko was standing near their table, she held a deep, irritated frown. Her eyes watched the store. Had it not been for Inage’s friends, it would’ve been empty by then. She refused to make eye contact with any of them. Her patience was running low.

*It’s been a while since Micchan’s sent me a message.* She thought as she briefly looked at her phone. The last message between them was the one that Yasuko had sent. Even though the app showed that Mitsuko had read it, she didn’t respond like she usually did. For some reason, even though she’d placed Mitsuko at the back of her mind for so long as she took on the role of Mirano, she felt a deep anguish inside her. Thinking of Mitsuko reminded her of everyone else in her family; her son, her daughter-in-law, her granddaughters and finally, her parents.

“Heeey! Mirano-chan? You’re being awfully quiet today, you know!” Another one of Inage’s friends said, his body swaying around with each word. He was completely drunk. Hearing the men speak so ignorantly made Yasuko furrow her brows. The men failed to notice this as her face was turned away.

“Hey, Nishio-san, what do you do outside of work? Besides coming here,” she muttered. The alcohol coursing through his veins made it difficult to hear the tone of her voice. For all he knew, this was another part of Mirano’s act.

“Besides coming here, you say? Hm... Maybe I’d check out the hostess bar near my workplace? My wife always complained when I went there, but who could stop me?” Nishio cackled as he looked at his friends for affirmation. The rest of the men laughed along.

“Why wouldn’t you listen to your wife? Don’t you love her?” Yasuko asked, her voice faintly quivering.

“Now, now, she doesn’t complain because she doesn’t want me to go there, she only complains because she has to do all the housework and handle the kids. But a man needs a break from his own work, you know! If somebody needed to do all that, it wouldn’t be me, haha!” Nishio and the other men continued to laugh, but Yasuko only bit her lip.

“What about you, Nakatani-san? Do you have any family back at home?” She asked, her voice beginning to quiver more and more.

“No wife, no kids, but I do live with my parents! But you know how they are, right? They’re a total pain in the arse, always trying to tell me what to do! That’s why I love coming here, to get away from all their whining!” Nakatani, another one of Inage’s friends, shouted. “I swear, if I have to hear their nagging one more time, they’re going straight into the nursing home!” He exclaimed, raising his glass in the air. The other men laughed mindlessly. They started to sound like a broken record to Yasuko.

“Inage-san? What about your family?” Yasuko asked weakly.

“Me? Well, I’m a divorcee for life. As for my parents, they passed long ago. But who needs family when you’ve got food, liquor and the lovely Mirano-chan standing around you?” Inage said, happily pointing his glass at Yasuko. The other men followed suit, cheering before taking another sip of their drinks.

Yasuko clenched her fist. However, she quickly loosened her grip, her head tilting down. With her glistening blonde hair concealing her face, she looked at the floor with despair. It felt like she had forgotten what she was looking for when she became Mirano. She didn’t even care if these men were entertained. Standing there, she realised that her family

had something that the pleasure of these men couldn't provide, and it was something that she needed in her life most.

The lights of the store were off, leaving it in darkness. Her coworkers were long gone when she started closing shop. While she inserted the keys into the front door to lock it, she had failed to notice three of Inage's friends loitering behind her. They were part of the group that only joined later on. As she began to walk off, those men made their move.

The night sky was as empty as the streets Yasuko strolled through. That was what she saw when she gazed up. She huffed from the loneliness of it all. Even though she occasionally passed the drunken salaryman slumping against a wall, or the high schooler that shouldn't be out at that time, her walk was desolate. It just wasn't the same without Taku leading her by the hand.

However, she would quickly realise that she wasn't alone after all.

"Hey, Mirano-chan!" One of the men waved his hand while he quickly stood in front of her, causing her to stop in her tracks as she jolted from his sudden appearance.

"Oh, Tashiro-san! What're you doing here?" Yasuko asked before she suddenly felt someone grab her shoulder. She turned to her left to find another man standing between her and the road, grinning at her mindlessly.

"We just happened to be going the same way!" The man said.

"Furuta-san? I thought you usually went the other way..."

"We were just heading to my place," the last man said behind Yasuko's back. She turned to him, not realising she was surrounded.

"I didn't know you went this way either, Murai-san."

"I rented it out recently. Why don't you come along, Mirano-chan?" Murai looked her straight in the eyes, giving her an intimidating smile.

It had been years since she'd worked at a hostess bar. Every now and then she'd hear stories of women like her getting into scary encounters with their customers. Some didn't make it out of them alive. She remembered what she was told during her first days at the hostess bar. *Never accept any invitations to go back with them.* Those were the words of her old boss. Hearing what Murai had said, those words started to ring in her head. She never thought she'd be one of the women in those stories.

She needed to get out.

"Oh, sorry, I have somewhere to be..." Yasuko spoke gently as she slowly backed away, raising her hands to her chest as she rejected Murai's advance. However, after taking



just a few steps, she was stopped by Tashiro standing behind her back. His chest almost felt like a wall of hardened concrete.

“At this time? Where to?” Tashiro asked.

“Oh, that’s why you refused the drinks, huh, Mirano-chan? You can’t get to where you need to be when you’re all tipsy,” Furuta said snarkily as he leaned closer to Yasuko.

“Don’t worry, Mirano-chan. It’ll be quick, I promise,” Murai said as he took a few slow steps towards Yasuko. His hand slowly reached towards her wrist. As he got closer and closer, her heart raced. The space between the men became claustrophobic. Her breathing grew heavier and heavier until she couldn’t stand being there anymore. In a panic, she turned and swiftly stepped around Tashiro, preparing to sprint. However, she was immediately stopped when Tashiro grabbed her wrist, lifting it into the air.

“Hey! It’s not very kind of you to leave us like that, Mirano-chan!” Tashiro said cheekily. Yasuko tried to shake her wrist out of his hand but his grip was too tight. Since she was stuck in place, she took a deep breath and opened her mouth wide.

“Help—”

However, Furuta quickly placed his hand over it.

“Oi, oi! Don’t yell! There’s people trying to sleep around here, you know!”

Yasuko tried to push his arm away, but Furuta grabbed her other arm to stop her from struggling. Murai got behind her and gripped her shoulders to keep her from pulling herself away. Yasuko continued to toss and turn, trying to free herself but to no avail.

“Just relax, Mirano-chan. We just want to have a little fun...” Murai said before turning to Tashiro. “Get the car. She’s not cooperating.” Tashiro nodded. He let go of Yasuko and turned. Ready to run, he took just a few quick steps when...

*SLAM!*

A heavy, lumpy plastic bag swung into his face, knocking him to the concrete pavement. While he laid on the ground, he winced as he felt his hand against his swollen red cheek. He was left overwhelmed by the stinging pain on his face, unable to get up. Everyone looked at the plastic bag and noticed it was filled with metal drink cans. Then, their eyes turned to the man wielding the weapon.

The man wore rectangular black-framed glasses. Through those frames, a deadly glare shot through the faces of the two men holding onto Yasuko. They felt like they’d seen him before, perhaps somewhere at the store. But the only faces they took note of were Mirano’s and the other young waitresses. The man barely visited their table anyway.

To her surprise, Yasuko could recognise that face anywhere. It was none other than her beloved Kurasawa Taku, the second shift manager that had been absent for the past few days. But the fever he had made his appearance unexpected, and seeing this ferocious side to him made Yasuko even more shocked.

“Oi!” Murai yelled at Taku. But he didn’t utter a word to the ones laying a finger on his woman. He only pushed up his glasses to the bridge of his nose and jumped forward while he swung his plastic bag backward. The two men let go of Yasuko, letting her fall to the ground while they prepared for Taku’s oncoming attack.

Murai held his arms out and tried to catch the plastic bag, but it slipped past them and hit him in the chin, causing him to fall to the ground like Tashiro did. Tashiro himself had gotten up and trudged towards Taku from behind, ready to strangle him. However, when he lunged towards him, Taku immediately noticed and swung his plastic bag into his face once more, leaving both his cheeks swollen and his entire face red like an uakari. Finally, his glare focused on Furuta. But seeing both of his friends knocked down, he took a few steps back instead, as if he were being hunted by a predator in the wild.

The three men immediately ran off like chickens. Taku stared them down until they were completely out of sight. Once they were, he turned to Yasuko, who was still sitting on the ground, frightened by the whole ordeal. Taku reached his hand out to her with the same friendly smile and gaze she had fallen in love with. Her hand shakily reached for his. Then, he pulled her up. Her panting slowed as she calmed herself down.

“Ta-kun... How?” Yasuko asked timidly.

“I happened to be feeling better,” he said while he cheekily raised his plastic bag to her. “I thought I’d meet you along the way so we could walk together again.” Yasuko looked at the bag of cans with apprehension, which caused Taku to chuckle. “Don’t worry. It’s not beer. It’s just some apple soda.”

Yasuko silently wrapped her arm around Taku’s before they resumed their journey to his apartment complex. She was still shivering in fear. Even after Taku saved her, she was left with the chilling thought that if Taku hadn’t arrived, her situation would’ve taken a much darker turn. Thankfully, the warmth of Taku’s body as she leaned against his side helped her forget about it all.

After the tranquility of walking beside him put her at ease, the image of Taku started to occupy her mind a little more. She was impressed by the display of strength he gave when he was driving those men away. It was a drastic contrast from his typically docile nature he had around her. Seeing his gentle, healthy smile right after saving her from the encounter

made her heart flutter too. His heroism wasn't the only thing she was happy about. Just the idea that the first thing he thought of when he got better was to come see her made Yasuko blush. She was glad to see him fit as a fiddle after spending so much time in bed. To think that he would do all this just for her.

Yasuko knew Taku was the one for her.

But with this deep feeling of love, another terrible urge began creeping from inside of her. As she stood behind Taku while he unlocked the front door to his apartment, her eyes were locked onto the back of his head, filled with an insatiable lust. Now that Taku was well, they could make love again. Now that they could make love, Yasuko could replenish her energy again. Now that she could get her energy back, things could go back to the way they were before Taku fell ill.

But Yasuko knew she wasn't going to be Mirano anymore after that encounter with Inage's friends. No, she needed something else; something she could focus on, something that would bring her the same quick pleasure she felt during the early days of Mirano's re-debut. If she could hold onto that pleasure forever, she wouldn't need to think about anything else. She didn't want to think about anything else.

"Woah!"

Once she heard the door creak open, she shoved Taku into the apartment. She slammed the door behind her. When Taku turned to her in shock, she immediately pulled his shirt in and kissed him on the lips. He dropped his plastic bag, the cans of soda rolling all over his laminated wooden floor. His hands were left in the air, unsure of what to do while Yasuko had her way with him. There wasn't much he could do, as they inched towards the sofa in his living room. Finally, she pushed him onto it, her lips not once disconnecting from him while they fell.

Yasuko shuffled her hips onto Taku's crotch, then she sat up while she pulled her face away. As Taku looked up at her with confusion, his eyes widened and his glasses crooked, he felt an immense pressure from her gaze alone. A shadow was cast over her smooth, beautiful face, like that of a siren in the middle of a tranquil ocean under the night sky. He could sense the lust in her half-opened eyes. After she panted from the excitement of making out with him, she gently opened her mouth.

"Ta-kun... I've been doing a lot of thinking lately..." Her fingers slithered over his warm cheeks like a feather. "I've been thinking about us... About how our lives have been over the past few months... But tonight I realised something..." She held his face with both her supple hands. "You really are the man for me."

“Uh... I’m r-really glad you see me that way, Yasuko,” Taku stammered.

Yasuko leaned in again, the tip of her nose touching his. “Hey, Ta-kun. Let’s have a child. Here and now.”

“Wh-what!?”

Yasuko hastily kissed him on the lips again, giving him no time to ask questions. His glasses fell off his face from how vigorous she was handling him. She pulled away again, looking into his eyes with her face completely flushed. Then, she lifted her back and started unbuttoning her shirt.

“We’ll get married, too, maybe before our child is born. I’ve planned a wedding before. I could probably get it done in at least three months.” Yasuko threw her shirt to the floor, displaying her scanty black lingerie.

Taku tried to get a word in. “Yasuko, you can’t seriously be thinking—”

But Yasuko dipped down and kissed him again. However, this time, Taku placed his hands against her chest and pushed her back, disconnecting their mouths. “Yasuko, I have no idea what you’re saying!”

Yasuko looked at Taku with desperation. “What’re you so confused about? We talked about this, didn’t we?” She started to push her chest against Taku’s hands. “The reason we didn’t get married was because I was focused on my parents. Don’t you remember!?” She pushed harder and harder, causing Taku’s arms to bend. “Well, I’m not focused anymore! So stop holding back, Ta-kun!” The pressure on Taku’s arms got stronger. She held onto his shoulders as her face inched closer and closer. Both of them gritted their teeth as they struggled. Tears welled up in Yasuko’s eyes. “We’ve been having sex for so long... You said you wanted to call me yours... So why are you pushing me back!?”

“You still haven’t told me... what changed!” Taku’s arms began to tremble.

“What changed!? My parents are about to kick the bucket, and my kids need to leave the nest! So it’s only you! I only have you, Ta-kun!” Yasuko yelled as the tears streamed down her soft cheeks.

“But Yasuko... Everything else you said... Having a kid!? I thought you didn’t want another! What about Ryuuji!? What about... What about me!?” Taku yelled, but Yasuko only continued pushing without saying a word. “Hey, Yasuko! We’ve talked about this! I’ve already told you how I feel about children! I thought we came to an agreement! And now this... This...” Taku flinched as he felt her tears drip onto his face. But with all his strength, he uttered the words to his beloved Yasuko.

“This isn’t you!”

Yasuko's river of tears continued to flow without any sign of stopping. Even after Taku yelled at her, she didn't immediately stop pressing him.

But after a few more snuffles, his words began to ring in her head. Each time it did, she remembered what the past few months had been like. Those nights of joy she felt when she entertained those men that came every time, and the boost of energy she felt when she made love to Taku, and eventually, the tired nights of putting on shows, the terrible headaches she'd get from her hangovers, the painful hours she'd wait for Taku just to make herself feel refreshed for a brief moment; all of it came back to her. Slowly, she stopped fighting Taku and let go of his shoulders, allowing him to lower his arms as well.

And at that moment, she realised...

She didn't want any of that.

Yasuko sunk to Taku's chest, grovelling over his body. She started to snuffle uncontrollably. Her glistening blonde hair concealed her face. Her suppressed little sounds almost sounded like chuckling. However, when she lifted her head, she revealed that was certainly not the case.

"Aaaaaaaah!" Yasuko wailed, her eyes shut as they were filled with watery tears. Her entire face was soaked. Her chin was dripping too. "I can't take it anymoooooore!" She tried to wipe away the endless stream of tears, but she quickly found her efforts fruitless, so she just screamed into the air. "Daaaaaaaad!" Taku sat up and embraced Yasuko while she continued to sob. "I don't want to be Mirano anymoooooore!" She cried out while Taku stroked her blonde hair.

Yasuko and Taku didn't make love that night, nor did Mirano ever make a return. They just slept next to each other in bed, bathing themselves in the silent peace of the night. The exhaustion from the whole ordeal made them fall asleep quickly. Neither of them snored nor tossed around. Yasuko simply laid in Taku's arms, her face snuggled into his chest. Once the trains started up again, Taku saw her out the door as she took her leave.

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The afternoon sun shined gently onto the white outer walls of the Takasu household. Ryuuji was busy washing some rice in the kitchen while Taiga was working at the family

computer in the living room. While the adults were at work, they could hear the muffled singing of two little girls outside their front door.

“Minna minna miiinna! Kanaete kureru!”

“Fushigina pokke de kanaete kuureeru!”

The singing got louder and louder as the source of the sound drew closer to the front door. Then, it came to a halt. Haruko happily pushed the front door open as she hopped into the house, Katsuko following behind her. Mitsuko, unlike her noisy sisters, stepped quietly into the house. They had just returned from school.

“We’re hooome!” She shouted while she and her sisters pulled their shoes off.

“Welcome home!” Their parents shouted back. Ryuuji gave them a bright, welcoming smile while Taiga still had her eyes glued to the computer.

“Sora wo jiyuu ni tobitaina!~” Haruko sang, hopping onto the raised floor on the last syllable she sang.

“Hai! Takekoputa!” Katsuko hopped beside her with her fist in the air. They continued singing as they hopped side to side up the stairs like frogs, holding onto the straps of their school bags as they bobbed their heads to the beat of their song.

While in the kitchen, Ryuuji chuckled. “It’s always so loud when they get home...” He had started slicing some fish on his wooden cutting board. When he listened closely, he could still hear his daughters’ voices above him.

“It doesn’t sound like they got into trouble today either...” Taiga added sarcastically. She liked to listen to her daughters’ melodious singing too. However, she furrowed her brows when she realised something off about their little coming-home-concert. It was a duet, not a vocal trio like it usually was. She worriedly turned to the front door and saw Mitsuko walking up the stairs. She could see it all behind the handlebars. Mitsuko was completely silent and held a straight face.

Taiga turned back to the computer with a worried frown. Her motherly instincts were slowly kicking in. But she decided to leave Mitsuko be until she got her own work done. She didn’t want to bother her daughter since she had just returned home. After all, Mitsuko always tried to keep herself hidden when an issue at school arose, but she couldn’t hide from her own mother. She knew it was best to strike before Mitsuko could realise she had been found out, so she waited.

Once night had fallen, Mitsuko was in her bed, laying on her side and facing the wall. Katsuko was drooling from her open mouth. Her sisters were already fast asleep. Not a sound could be heard from either of them. The light from the screen of her phone shone in her eyes

as she held it up to her face. She had her messages with Yasuko open, but the message bar remained completely empty.

*I won't have the time to read your messages.* That was the last message sent between the girl and her beloved grandmother.

Mitsuko bit her lip. Her eyes became watery. Her chest was aching. She wasn't sure what she was feeling while she was laying under her covers. She felt absolutely betrayed for all her ignored messages, but she could never be angry at Yasuko or anyone for that matter. She was more worried about something else.

*If I can't talk to Ya-chan, then who?* All the people in her life came to mind; her parents, her sisters, her teachers, but her reasonings for avoiding them didn't change. There was always some excuse she couldn't talk to them. Her parents couldn't understand. Her sisters had their own problems. Her teachers were complete strangers. Eventually, the excuses accumulated until there was nobody left. She had isolated herself within her own mind. She strained her eyes and tried to find somebody, but there wasn't.

She was alone.

Amongst the humming of the bedroom's air conditioner, Mitsuko suddenly heard the sound of someone turning the doorknob to their room. She quickly turned her phone off and slid it under her pillow, then she closed her eyes and pretended to sleep. She heard the creak of the door swinging open, followed by a few gentle footsteps.

Mitsuko's shoulders tensed up when she noticed the footsteps drawing closer and closer until it eventually arrived at her bedside. She knew who was there. She had listened to her family's footsteps her whole life and could differentiate between them. Her father's were usually heavier given his size. Her little brother was young, so his footsteps were soft and quiet like an owl. As for her mother, they were somewhere in between. They were just like the ones she had heard a moment ago.

"Mitsuko?" Taiga said softly. Mitsuko could hear the rustle in her mother's clothes as she knelt on the cold wooden floor. She could feel the weight of her mother's arms resting on the mattress behind her back. "Are you awake?"

Nothing.

"Hey, Mitsuko..." Taiga rested her chin on the bed. "You must think I'm really scary, huh? Back then, hearing Mom shout at those bullies must've frightened you a lot..."

Mitsuko gently shook her head. The last thing she wanted was her own mother to feel bad about herself. But just like that, her "sleeping" act was over. Taiga smirked and stroked her daughter's bare, slender arm.

“Did something happen at school today, Mitsuko?” Taiga asked gently. Mitsuko didn’t respond. She just tilted her head away. “Well, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. Did you message Ya-chan about it?”

Mitsuko shook her head again. “She’s too busy to read my messages,” she said faintly.

“She isn’t answering my messages either. I guess that means we’ll have to talk to each other, hm?” Her daughter didn’t respond. She just laid there silently. In her attempt to lighten the mood, Taiga cheekily pursed her lips. “Hey, I’ve known her longer than you do. She’s not just your favourite person, you know.”

“I thought your favourite person was Dad.”

“He’s my other favourite person... But Dad and I know her the best.” Taiga gave a nostalgic sigh. “She was always there for us. Your father made the meals when we were in high school but Ya-chan paid for all of it. She helped us plan our wedding, took care of me when I was pregnant, helped me change your diapers...” She leaned closer to her daughter. “So when I see how much you love her, I just think... I get it.”

“If you know her more than I do...” Mitsuko asked. “Then is it true?” She gripped her mattress covers tightly. “Is it true that Ya-chan had special psychic powers? That she used to be able to teleport anywhere in an instant?” Taiga quietly sighed while her daughter spoke. “Is it true that her hair is blonde because she’s an angel sent down from heaven to take care of us?” Mitsuko’s lips quivered. “Is it true... that she’s special?”

Taiga slowly got on her feet. She rubbed Mitsuko’s brunette hair.

“No, Ya-chan isn’t special at all,” she uttered. Her daughter immediately frowned. “Because Mom and Dad have superpowers too, you know.” Mitsuko’s eyes lit up while Taiga continued to caress her hair. “We’re using it every single day. You just can’t see it.”

Mitsuko’s eyes softened. Her mother’s warm touch left a pleasant tingling in her head. “It’s how your father always makes delicious food, or how he always keeps the house clean.” Taiga got on one knee to bring her face closer to her daughter. “It’s how I gave birth to you and your sisters. It’s what I use to protect you from monsters.” She leaned closer to the side of her daughter’s head. “Just like Ya-chan, we have as many tricks up our sleeves as she does. And we use them all for you, Mitsuko.”

Taiga scanned the long bed Mitsuko was sleeping on, then she chuckled. “Hey, do you remember all those times you and your sisters came to sleep in Mom and Dad’s bed whenever you three got scared of the dark?” She felt the fabric of Mitsuko’s blanket. “Is it okay if... I got in bed with you?”



Mitsuko promptly shuffled forward, leaving some space for her mother to slip under the covers with her. Once Taiga tucked herself in, she wrapped her arms around her daughter and pressed her chest against her back. Mitsuko could feel her mother's thighs under her own. It felt no different than a girl sitting in her mother's lap.

"Is this too close?" Taiga asked. Mitsuko shook her head. "Is it comfortable?" Mitsuko closed her eyes and took in her mother's body warmth. She nodded. It was more comfortable than hugging a giant plush toy. "Ah... You're already such a big girl. It really has been a long time since we've slept together..."

Taiga buried her nose in her daughter's hair. "You've almost completed two years of school, too. Time flies by so quickly... Do you remember your first days at school, Mitsuko? You and your sisters were so excited. You were going to learn new things and meet so many kids your age..." She hugged her daughter tighter. "I guess... You must've been really sad when you realised it wasn't what you thought it was, right?"

Mitsuko listened to her mother attentively. At that moment, it seemed like her mother understood. She couldn't ignore that. Taiga huffed. "School isn't easy for everyone. For kids like you and your sisters, it can be really tough. But you managed to push through for so long. You've been very strong, Mitsuko. You've always been such a good girl." She rested her chin on her daughter's shoulder. "But you aren't looking for praise, are you? You just want all of this to be over..."

The air was still. Mitsuko couldn't even hear the air conditioning anymore, only her mother's voice speaking softly in her ear. "I'm sorry for sending you to school, Mitsuko. Even though I'm forced to send you there, I'm supposed to make it easier for you. But I haven't been doing a very good job at that."

Mitsuko bit her lip. "I'm always calling your teachers and asking about you. I've talked to the parents of all the other kids but even then, it just doesn't stop, right? I need to do more. I need to make sure you can go to school and come back with a big smile." Taiga stroked the top of her daughter's head. "I... hope you can come to forgive me, Mitsuko. I know how difficult all of this is for you. But even if you don't want to, I won't stop finding new ways to help you."

Taiga looked at her daughter for a moment, letting her daughter think about her words. She wasn't expecting a response.

"You don't have to do that," Mitsuko spoke faintly. She hoped that would be the end of it. But Taiga only frowned deeply.

“But I want to...” Taiga said shakily. She whined and hugged her daughter tighter. “Oh, Mitsuko, please don’t say things like that... You are loved so much more than you think. Dad loves you, your sisters love you, even your brother does too. Ya-chan hasn’t stopped loving you either. She’s not the only one looking out for you, you know.”

Taiga tried to snuggle even closer to her daughter, but she was already as close as she could get. “I didn’t become your mother by mistake. Everything I do, I do for you, Mitsuko. It’s just...” She huffed in desperation. “I know I might not understand you sometimes, but I really want to. Sometimes I’d wish you’d be more patient with me, but it’s okay if that’s too much for you. But at the very least, don’t keep to yourself, alright?”

Mitsuko stared at the wall in front of her with sorrow and confusion. Her mother was saying a lot of words too fast for her to process precisely. At the same time, she could make out what she was trying to say. But all this was too much for a kid like her. She wasn’t sure how she was supposed to respond.

“I know I told you about me having superpowers. There really is so much I can do... But reading minds isn’t one of them.” Taiga stared blankly as she stroked her daughter’s hair. “I want to give you advice... I want to talk about things that make you happy... And if you don’t want to do those things with me, can you at least let me see you cry? Because once I do, I’ll know I have to do my best to make you feel better again...”

Taiga suddenly blinked and stopped fondling her daughter’s hair. “O-oh, sorry, I spoke too much... Did you understand any of that, Mitsuko?”

Mitsuko nodded. Seeing this, Taiga smirked. She swirled her finger around Mitsuko’s smooth little cheek.

“You must be tired of hearing Mom speak. Sleep well, alright? It’ll be another day of school tomorrow. Dad is going to make something really good for breakfast so you start your day with a big smile. But if the day gets difficult, you can talk to me. Or if the day was just fine, you can talk to me too. If something good happens, tell me. I’d listen to anything.” Taiga then sat up and pressed her lips against Mitsuko’s cheek. With her eyes calmly shut, she let it stick there for a few seconds before pulling away and lying back down.

“Good night, Mitsuko...” She whispered in her daughter’s ear. Mitsuko didn’t hear another word from her mother after that. She only felt her mother’s warm breath blowing against the back of her neck. All was quiet then.

Mitsuko remained awake, but her mother’s comfortable warmth was slowly putting her to sleep. She felt her eyelids grow heavier and heavier. She held her mother’s arm and hugged it close to her body. She buried her face in its soft skin. For some reason, even though

she came home from a tough day at school, she felt ready to go to school again. Maybe the next day would be difficult too. But her mother was so warm; warmer than snuggling under a blanket. Maybe the next day would be difficult too. But when she would come home, Mom would be there. Just like Yasuko was before she moved away.

“Nngh... Hm... Hn?” Taiga rubbed her eye as the morning light shone through the two windows in her daughters’ bedroom. She had woken up half an hour before their alarm clock would go off. It seemed because of that, her body felt so much heavier. Her entire body felt much warmer, too.

“Ugh... You three...”

Well, not really. At some point in the night, Haruko and Katsuko had woken up and joined their mother in their sister’s bed. Haruko hugged her mother’s back while Katsuko was at her legs. Mitsuko had also turned around and buried her face in her mother’s soft chest. She was completely constricted.

Taiga only sighed and laid there, waiting for the alarm to trigger.

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“How’ve you been sleeping, Yasuko?” Taku asked.

The couple sat by the ledge at the entrance of Yasuko’s parents’ home, facing the bright outdoors while they rested in the shade of the roof over their heads. Their feet laid beside the empty shoes at the foot of the ledge. Between them was a little box of okonomiyaki, its transparent plastic lid clouded by water droplets condensing underneath. Behind the box, their hands laid atop each other.

“Terrible...” Yasuko groaned before she sighed. “I’ve been sleeping through entire afternoons for the past few days. My shoulders always feel heavy when I’m awake. I haven’t been able to do anything at all.”

“Do you think you’ll be ready to return to the store soon? Or do you need a longer break? I don’t mind taking over for a few more days.”

“It barely feels like a break if I’m sleeping most of the time... And it’s not like I want to, I just...” Yasuko winced, but she immediately relaxed when Taku gently caressed her palm with his fingers.

“Take as long as you need, Yasuko.”

Yasuko caressed Taku's hand like he did to hers. Her gaze fell to the stone floor below her as she fidgeted with her feet, teetering them left and right. "How've things been at the store for the past few nights?"

Taku pursed his lips while he pondered. "Not much. Inage-san returned to the store. He said he was deeply sorry for what his friends did. He seemed sincere, but I ended up giving him a scary look when he tried to tell me they weren't as bad as they seemed. Well, either way, we won't be seeing him or his friends ever again."

Yasuko's head tilted away from Taku. "I'm sorry, Ta-kun... About that night..." She said weakly. "I shouldn't have forced myself onto you. There's really no excuse..."

"It's fine," Taku uttered before scratching his head. "Looking back, things got really uncomfortable. I got really worried that you were going to rope me into something against my will, but I was also afraid of hurting you if I ever pushed back too hard, so I was put in a really tough spot..." He sighed. Yasuko stared ahead of herself as she listened to him. "Well, I suppose I do need a little break from love-making."

Taku then looked at Yasuko with a reassuring smile.

"But I don't want to make this about myself. I still love you, Yasuko. I want to continue being there for you." He rubbed her back from where he sat. "Just don't keep things to yourself anymore, alright? Talk to anyone; me, Ryuuji, your parents, anyone. Keeping quiet won't do you any good."

Yasuko nodded quietly. With that, Taku stood up and prepared to take his leave. He kissed her on the lips before walking off. She slid the front door shut, enshrouding herself in the darkness of her parents' home. She went to the living room and sat at the short table to help herself to the okonomiyaki Taku made for her.

She slowly chewed a piece, little crunches coming from the cabbage in her mouth. The couple had spoken long enough for the pancake to get soggy. Regardless, she swallowed and reached for another piece. With a lump of food in one of her cheeks, she sighed.

She hadn't felt this down in a long time.

However, as she sat at the table with this aching feeling in her body, she realised she was more familiar with it than she thought. There was only one other instance where she was struck with this immense, endless fatigue. It was the day of Ryuuji's birth.

"Is there anyone I should call?"

That was what one of the nurses tending to Yasuko asked while she laid in her hospital bed, as if to rub in the loneliness of it all. She was stuck to her mattress, feeling the

aftereffects of childbirth, while little Ryuuji was asleep on the trolley next to her. Ryuuji's father had run off with another woman, and she had a falling out with her parents. There really was nobody she could call.

She remembered the tears that came as Ryuuji was being born. It looked like it came from the burning pain that was naturally caused by childbirth. But there was another aching pain in her chest caused by her longing to at least hold the hand of someone she knew while she endured such an agonising experience.

She was in the hospital longer than anticipated with the physical exhaustion caused by childbirth. But the truth was she never had a reason to leave that mattress. She couldn't find a reason to continue that lonely life of hers. She knew that once she returned to that crummy two-bedroom apartment, it would just be her and her baby.

Then, little Ryuuji started to cry.

That was when she remembered what brought her to that point. She slowly sat up from her hospital bed and nursed her newborn baby. She had to keep going. She had to be resilient. She had to protect this baby she fought so hard to have. Even though she could barely sleep, and she barely had the will to even move her body, she had to keep going. This was the new, difficult life she had to take on.

Yasuko didn't exactly remember enjoying her job at the hostess bar. The managers were strict and being around all those drunk men was uncomfortable. That was what it was like for the first few weeks. But then she came home, and her little boy was there. He used to be so overjoyed to see her come through that front door. Feeling him excitedly hug her legs just made it all worth it.

Eventually, Mirano got more popular at the bar as she grew older. By the time she was twenty years old, she had grown into the features Mirano was known for today, that being her large breasts and wide hips. She was one of the most successful entertainers there, and she revelled in it. It was fun being surrounded by all the fanfare from her male patrons. She believed it was a part of who she was. But she was already happy with her life by then. She'd lost sight of what was truly bringing her joy: her family.

Every time she came home, she never had to worry about being alone, because Ryuuji would be there. Even without a husband to help her care for her child or her own parents to guide her through parenthood, she had a family. A small, two-person family.

Then a third person came.

Suddenly, she was seeing her parents again.

Before she knew it, she had grandchildren.

It was like nothing had changed. She only got happier and happier as her family grew. She had parents to guide her and more children to take care of. She'd forgotten the loneliness that came when she lost those connections with everyone she loved. But once she realised the time her parents had to be with her was coming to an end, it felt like all that pain was coming back. There was going to come a time she was going to lose the people she had the deepest connection with, and she knew wasn't ready for it.

After finishing her little snack, Yasuko tossed the empty, dirty container into a dustbin before she started walking back to the living room. She didn't feel tired enough to fall asleep again, so she planned on watching TV until she dozed off. However, she stopped when she passed her parents' room. The door was left open, allowing her to look inside.

Her mother was cheerily whispering something to her father, who was clearly awake and leaning close to his wife's mouth. Yasuko couldn't make out anything they were saying, but there was something she said that made her father chuckle. Suddenly, Yasuko and her father made eye contact. He spotted her standing by the doorway and quickly tapped on his wife's shoulder, causing her to turn and spot Yasuko as well.

"What were you two talking about?" She asked faintly.

"Oh, nothing!" Sonoko said as she stood up and briskly walked towards her daughter. As she got closer, Yasuko could see that she was wearing her usual exercise gear: a dark red tracksuit and a light pink sweatband on her head. "Come now, don't disturb your father. He needs his sleep."

Sure enough, Seiji had hurriedly laid back and shut his eyes. But it almost looked like he was pretending to sleep. Yasuko was too exhausted to care. Her mother slid the door shut before she could get a closer look. Then, her mother looked her in the eyes with bliss. She cheerfully clasped her hands together.

"Hey, Yasuko, how about we head outside and take a walk together?" Sonoko asked, pretending to walk on the spot.

"Eeh..." Yasuko only whined.

"You've been spending too much time indoors, Yasuko. You need to get out and move those feet about!" Sonoko said confidently. Her "fitness" mindset had fully taken over while her daughter was wasting all her days and nights at work.

"But I'm not wearing the right clothes..." Yasuko held her arms out and looked at her outfit. She was wearing a baggy, long-sleeved dull gray shirt, with long pants of the same colour. She'd basically be walking around in her pajamas.

“Oh, please, you’ve been outside wearing less! Come! Enough dillydalling!”

“Eeeh...”

Yasuko whined again as her mother dragged her towards the front door. She was too tired to resist her mother’s advances.

Before she knew it, she was walking through the neighbourhood park alongside her mother. It was full of joggers and people walking their dogs. Every now and then, one of their neighbours would pass by, getting some exercise just like they were. Yasuko would plaster on a smile similar to her mother’s to greet them.

“So when are you going to tie the knot with Taku-san? He really seems like the perfect husband for a woman like you,” Sonoko said while she moved her arms forward and backward like a jogger.

“I’m really not in the mood for questions like that...”

“Hmph.” Sonoko pouted. “Can I at least ask about what’s been going on with you? You barely talk to me and your father anymore.”

Yasuko groaned and scratched her forehead with her finger. The walls she’d built around herself had all crumbled. She couldn’t bear to build them back up again. “Nngh... I don’t even remember anymore... I did a lot of dumb things at work. I’ve been getting wasted for months. I just... Ugh... Couldn’t stand everything...”

“Couldn’t stand what?”

Yasuko bit her lip at the question.

“I just don’t... want you to go...” She mumbled.

“What was that?” Sonoko asked cluelessly. Yasuko sighed.

“I don’t want you to go,” she spoke with her chest.

“Yasuko, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Mom, please, be realistic here. You and Dad... You’re getting old.”

“Aren’t we all?” Yasuko’s mother chuckled.

But Yasuko herself just stopped in her tracks. “Are you not worried about it one bit? Dad got that stroke, and you’ve still got that diabetes. Are those not a cause for concern?”

“Those were settled a long time ago. I’m fit as a fiddle now, and your father’s been making a steady recovery this entire time. You’ve just never been home to see it.” Sonoko snarkily crossed her arms.

“But people your age are more vulnerable to that kind of thing! Dad’s in his 70s, and you’re almost there too! It won’t be long before... Before...” Yasuko stammered. She couldn’t complete her sentence. Sonoko sighed.

“Yeah. I guess an end really is in sight, huh?” She rubbed her daughter’s back to soothe her. “But so what? That’s just nature.”

“I know, but... I’m not ready. I don’t want an end to be in sight...” Yasuko said while Sonoko nudged her to a nearby bench so they could sit beside each other and overlook a little duck pond in front of them.

“We spent so much time apart... It feels like just yesterday we had gotten back together. We were having so much fun travelling and spending time together... Now I have to come to terms with the fact that you’re going away? It’s not fair. It’s not fair at all...” Yasuko slouched down and clenched her fists on her lap tightly. Two ducks were swimming together in a row while she spoke. A little duckling was swimming between them, but it had begun to trail behind its parents, getting farther and farther.

“I tried not to think about it. I tried to force myself to move on... I thought... If I had something else I could focus on, it wouldn’t feel as bad when the day eventually arrived, but... I ended up doing a lot of horrible things... To Ta-kun... To myself... I’m completely hopeless. There isn’t anything else for me once you’re gone...” Yasuko slowly shook her head at how pathetic she had been acting for the past few months.

“What about Ryuuji and Taiga? I’m sure your children and grandchildren still need you around,” Sonoko asked with her hand resting on her daughter’s back.

“This isn’t about them... I still care about them, but Ryuu-chan and Taiga-chan have their whole lives ahead of them, and so do their children. They have a complete family...” Yasuko turned to her mother and exclaimed. “And I still need mine!”

After she looked at her with desperation, she slouched down again. “But I know... I have to be resilient. I thought I was used to big changes. I thought... If I ever had to let go of my current life, I could just go and focus myself on another... Maybe I could’ve started a new life with Ta-kun... Or gotten more ambitious at work... But I can’t let go of you and Dad, no matter how hard I try. This is the only life I’m ready to live...”

Despite the gloom her daughter was emitting, Sonoko smiled. To a degree, she was flattered. She felt herself begin to blush at the joy of hearing her daughter voice her affection so clearly to her. But she didn’t want to spend too much time relishing in herself, so she stood up and stretched her arms. “If this is the only life you’re ready to live...” She looked at her daughter confidently. “Then just keep living it.”



She reached her hand out to Yasuko, who hesitantly took it before she was lifted to her feet. “It’s great that you’re trying to be resilient, but I think it’s best if you save your energy until *after* we’re gone.” The two women looked towards the tranquil pond again, where two ducks were floating in the water, waiting for their duckling to catch up to them. “Do you remember what your father said back when he first had that stroke?”

Yasuko pinched her forehead and strained her eyes. “Uh... No, I forgot.”

Sonoko chuckled. “When the day comes when he has to leave, he wants you to give him a big smile so he can be at rest. I think I’d want the same thing. But we won’t get to see it if you’re trying to avoid us all the time.” She soothingly caressed the back of Yasuko’s hand with her thumb. “Besides, if time really was running out, wouldn’t it make more sense to make the most out of what’s left?”

“But... What if I can’t move on once you’re gone?”

“You will. You already have the means to. You’ve got a large family and a wonderful man to look after you. Maybe once your father and I have passed, you can start focusing on them, too.” Sonoko leaned her head on Yasuko’s shoulder. “All I’m asking is you start moving on when the time is right. This kind of thing is going to hurt regardless of how ready you are. What if you end up hurting more because of all the time you could’ve spent just being with us?”

“I... didn’t think about it that way.”

Sonoko simpered and hugged her daughter’s arm. “Did I finally get through to you?”

Yasuko scratched her head and groaned. “I don’t know... I just don’t want to feel this horrible again...”

“Hey, maybe, to make you feel better, we’ll go on another vacation with your father. It’s about time we go overseas again,” Sonoko said while she playfully shook Yasuko’s arm.

“Maybe when he’s well again...” Yasuko said faintly.

“Yahoo!” Her mother hopped with joy.

The two women resumed their walk through the park, leaving the little pond with the two ducks and their duckling, which was now swimming between them. They basked in the pleasant greenery surrounding them and walked until they had seen all the park had to offer. After a fulfilling day outdoors, they made their way home.

“And then she told me ‘you’re like the mom I never had!’ and hugged me tightly!”

Sonoko guffawed. “Eeeh? Is it really okay for coworkers to do that?”

Yasuko laughed along. “Haha! Kids these days can be so silly!”

The two women were approaching the entrance to their home. Sonoko was walking ahead of Yasuko at first, but when she spotted the front door, she quietly slowed her pace so her daughter would be walking in front instead. Yasuko was completely oblivious to what she was doing. She silently watched her reach for the handle, smiling as she struggled to contain her excitement.

“And so I said, I’ve already got a kid! But then she...”

Yasuko chattered while she slid the door open. But when she looked inside, her voice trailed off. Her eyes widened in shock. She saw, within the shadows of the unlit corridor, a scrawny man standing before her. He wasn’t supposed to, but he was. His arms were crossed and he had a wide smirk on his face. He showed his teeth with his grin, then he spread his arms wide apart, putting his whole, healthy body on display.

“D...” Yasuko mumbled.

“Take a good look, Yasuko. Your old man’s standing tall like a tree,” Seiji said.

“Daaad!” Yasuko cried out before lunging forward and hugging her father. The force of her body hitting him made him jerk backward. It really was him, standing on his two feet instead of pitifully laying in bed. His body was so warm. It had only been a few months yet she could barely remember the last time she’d felt it. Her heart was beating intensely. She just couldn’t contain herself.

“Woah, woah, easy now... I told you I’d be fine, didn’t I?” He said, caressing Yasuko’s golden blonde hair. His daughter looked up at her father, her eyes shining as they became watery and her lips quivering like jelly. Then, she wailed as loudly as a car’s engine.

“I’m soooooorryyy Daaad! I thought you were gone for goooood!” She howled, her entire face leaking like cracks in a drain pipe. She gripped her father’s shirt tightly. “I did sooo many stuupid thiiings! I even shouted at youuuu!! I’m soooooorryy!!”

“Well, I’ve never seen you *not* do anything silly, but there’s no need to worry about that anymore. I’m glad you came to your senses, Yasuko,” Seiji said softly.

“But... So suddenly... When did you get better?”

“You were always somewhere else, so it gave us ample time to surprise you. But we’ve still got one more thing to show you...”

Yasuko watched her father pull out a little flyer out of his pocket. He held it up for her to see the big words on the top of it which read, “An Exquisite Trip to Singapore”. Her eyes lit up once she saw those words. The flyer was coloured with pictures of families enjoying exciting activities and admiring the dazzling city sights.

“You’ve always been the one to plan the trips for us, so we thought we’d do the planning instead,” Sonoko added. “We’ve been thinking of doing this since the last trip, and we settled on Singapore at the start of the year. We’ve already done all the planning. Now that your father’s well, how about we go on this trip to celebrate his recovery?” She clasped her hands together excitedly.

Yasuko looked at her mother with her watery eyes before grabbing her arm and pulling both of her parents in for a hug. “Waaaaaah! You guuuuys!” She wailed, tears streaming down her face like two waterfalls over her cheeks. Her parents chuckled at their daughter’s outburst. They returned her hug, wrapping their arms around her back.

At that moment, it was like everything was going back to the way things were before her father had gotten sick. They were going on another vacation together as a family. She was going to experience all those happy days again. But after the past months, she knew she couldn’t forget the current state of affairs. This wasn’t a return to normalcy, but a second chance for her to spend time with her parents to the fullest.

As she looked at her elderly parents with her bright and cheery smile, wiping the joyful river of tears off her face, she promised herself never to let go of this happiness until the time was right.

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“Oh, I just heard my grandfather’s made a full recovery.”

Ryuuji spoke to his wife at the dinner table. It was another average night at the Takasu household. Everyone had returned home from school or work and had changed into some comfortable casual wear. They were having dinner together like they did every night. The three sisters were helping themselves to the delicious food their father made for them, while Taiga was carefully watching her son, Yuuchi, to make sure he didn’t spill anything.

“That sounds nice. Ya-chan must be quite happy too, huh?” Taiga responded.

“Yeah, she’s going on another vacation with her parents tomorrow. They’re flying to Singapore,” Ryuuji said. Mitsuko’s ears shot up and her eyes widened while she was chewing a clump of white rice in her mouth.

“Singapore? Ah, I’d love to go there someday,” Taiga said while she wiped a sauce stain on Yuuchi’s shirt. “It’s been a while since we’ve gone overseas, hasn’t it? I was actually planning on bringing us to Hong Kong just before Yuuchi was born, but everything got so hectic leading up to my due date, so I scrapped the idea.”

“Maybe we could go there this year. It would be nice going somewhere outside of Japan. How about we go when the girls are on holiday?”

Mitsuko, sitting at the far end of the table opposite her mother, forcefully swallowed the food in her mouth, a big lump going down her neck, taking her chance to speak before the subject changed. “Ya-chan is going overseas again!?”

“Yup. She just told me earlier today,” Ryuuji told her.

“C-can we go see her at the airport?” Mitsuko stammered.

“Sorry, Mitsuko, her flight’s at noon. You’d be in school at that time.”

“Wh-what?” Her voice quivered. “But... but we always see her...”

“I’ll be going to the airport. Maybe you could message her?”

“No, I want to go...” Mitsuko’s nose scrunched up as she sniffled. Her face turned red and her eyes became watery. “I want to go...” She whimpered while she wiped her eyes.

“Oh, Mitsuko...” Taiga mumbled.

Ryuuji stood up and walked over to his daughter after taking a tissue from a little box on the table. He knelt beside her and tried to wipe the tears flowing down her cheeks, while Mitsuko herself was struggling to wipe them herself.

“There, there...” Ryuuji spoke soothingly. “I know you want to go, but you can’t just skip school. It’ll just be one day where you won’t get to see her. Maybe we can see her when she comes back?”

However, while he tried to wipe her chin, Mitsuko turned her head away. He didn’t seem to notice that her avoiding his tissue was deliberate, despite her grabbing his arm and trying to push it away. She was too weak for him to notice it. Furthermore, seeing her sister in distress, Haruko decided to imitate her father, caressing Mitsuko’s arm and saying “There, there...” soothingly just like he did. Katsuko then tried to imitate Haruko from where she sat, wanting to calm Mitsuko as well.

“Come on, Mitsuko. It’ll be fine.”

Not wanting to cause anymore of a fuss, Mitsuko just huffed and sniffled, bringing her whimpering to a halt and letting her father wipe her face. But her qualms about not getting to see Yasuko off was making her incredibly irritated. She became more sensitive to the texture of the tissue in her father’s hand and the stroking of her arms from her sisters. It felt like an itch was forming all over her body.

But even though she was feeling overwhelmed, she refused to say anything to worry them. She just sat there, tightening her lips and gripping her knees tightly, hoping it would

quickly wash over her like the ocean's tide. Neither Ryuuji nor her sisters could notice that she was shivering. They just assumed she was trying to suppress a cry.

Once her face was dry, Ryuuji leaned in and gave Mitsuko a soft smile.

"All better?" He asked, glad to see that Mitsuko's whimpering had stopped. She nodded, still trembling. Taiga, however, could see it from the other side of the table. With her sharp motherly senses, she could tell her daughter was uncomfortable.

"Ryuuji, she's..." Taiga tried to point it out, but she stopped herself and sighed when Mitsuko quietly returned to eating. "Nevermind..." Ryuuji looked at her with confusion. Taiga didn't want to cause a fuss, either.

Ryuuji returned to his seat as the rest of the family resumed their meal.

The next day, the girls were seen off by their father as they left for school early in the morning. Taiga left the house with them as she was leaving for work as well. Ryuuji held Yuuchi in his arms. Both of them waved as all the girls walked through the front door. Once the door was shut and all was quiet, Ryuuji looked at his son.

"I guess it's time for us to get ready, huh?"

Ryuuji bathed little Yuuchi, holding and jittering the showerhead over him and watching him giggle under the water splashing all over him. Then, after wrapping him in a towel, he blasted him with a warm gust of wind from a blow dryer. Finally, he helped his son slip into a nice striped shirt. Of course, Ryuuji was getting himself ready at the same time. After putting their shoes on, they left through the front door holding each other's hand. The house really was empty now.

"Ah! Ryuu-chan, you're here! Ooh, and little Yuuchi is here, too!" Yasuko cheerfully greeted his son and grandson at the entrance of her parents' home. The two boys, with smiles on their faces, gave friendly waves to the blonde-haired woman standing before them. They followed her to the living room, where Sonoko, Seiji and another man with glasses were sitting at a short table and chatting with one another.

"Oh, Taku-san!" Ryuuji exclaimed after making eye contact with the man wearing rectangular glasses. The man suddenly straightened his posture.

"Hey, Ryuuji! It's great to see you, man!" Taku said as Ryuuji set his son down and walked over to give him a firm, but welcoming handshake. "I've been doing my best to take care of your mother, just like you asked." While they were speaking, Yasuko stretched her arms wide with an open smile, letting the little boy standing at Ryuuji's legs scuttle over and jump into her chest. She hugged Yuuchi like a teddy bear.

“It means the world to me, Taku-san. By the way, is that your car in the driveway?” Ryuuji asked. Sure enough, there was a clean, shiny red four-seater Mercedes-Benz parked at the front of the house.

Taku shook his head. “Oh, no, that’s a rental. I’ve only got it booked today so I can drive all of us to the airport.” There were three luggages sitting in the corner of the room which were to be loaded into the back of the car.

“What a gentleman you are, Taku-san!” Seiji uttered joyfully, patting him on the back. Taku bashfully scratched the back of his head and chuckled.

“So what’re you guys going to do once you’re there?” Ryuuji asked.

“I’ve got the itinerary!” Sonoko said cheerfully, holding up a little colourful pamphlet under her chin. She set it flat onto the table and opened it, revealing photos of all the exciting activities the Takasu family planned on doing. “First, we’ll check into our hotel, then we’ll go for a walk to take in the scenery, arriving at the park nearby, and then...”

Ryuuji joined his family at the table to listen to them talk all about their vacation. He smiled, seeing how happy and healthy everyone was. It seemed like everyone was so excited now that Seiji had recovered and could walk again.

While Ryuuji was with his family, his daughters had arrived at the entrance of their school. The three girls joined the sea of school children flowing into the gates. However, Mitsuko trailed behind her sisters. She furrowed her brows and stopped in her tracks, then turned around, moving away from the school. Her sisters watched as she ran off and disappeared into the distance, before continuing into the school.

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“Mitsuko isn’t in school!?”

Taiga yelped as she stood in her office with her cellphone up to her ear. It was a busy day at work. Everyone in the office was scrambling to get things done before an incoming deadline. Taiga, however, had isolated herself in the peace of her office to take a call.

“Yes, I was wondering if she was at home with her father. Has she fallen sick?”

A young woman spoke on the other end of the line, that woman being the homeroom teacher for Taiga’s daughters.

“What? No! They were together when I saw them off for school,” Taiga said as she pinched her eyes frustratedly.

“I’m sorry, her sisters wouldn’t tell me anything. Should I call your husband instead?”

“No, no, he isn’t home right now. Just don’t let Haruko and Katsuko go anywhere.”

“Alri—”

Taiga hung up. She looked at the ceiling and sighed before taking her coat and strutting out of her office, returning to the chaos outside.

“Oh, Takasu-sa—”

“Sorry, clocking out early!”

With her school bag, Mitsuko ran through a neighbourhood different from the one she lived in, panting heavily as she began to feel exhausted. She turned onto the premises of a house with an old-looking entrance. Then, after giving a decently strong knock on the front door, she waited. And waited. And waited. She pouted and knocked harder, the banging getting louder and louder. She even called out, “Ya-chaaaaan!” but that only got the brief attention of one of the neighbours. When she waited again, nobody came to answer.

“Hnnn!” She whined and stomped her foot. It seemed they’d left already. She huffed in frustration, but her eyes immediately lit up when an idea popped into her head. She took out her phone and opened the GPS app. After fiddling with it for a bit, she was given a route that led to Haneda Airport. She started running again, hoping to reach before Yasuko entered the departure hall.

“She went to see Ya-chan by herself!?”

Taiga yelled with her arms crossed as she stood over Haruko and Katsuko intimidatingly. They were in the corridor just outside their classroom. Teachers and students that passed by would glance at them curiously.

“Yeah. She left before we went to school,” Haruko said nonchalantly. Neither of the girls planned on hiding anything from their mother. Taiga never handled lies well. The last time they did, Haruko wasn’t allowed snacks and Katsuko wasn’t allowed to watch her favourite cartoons for three whole days. Besides, they didn’t really have a reason to hide. Mitsuko had already gone off.

“And you two didn’t try to stop her!?”

“She really wanted to see Ya-chan!” Katsuko rebutted, swaying her little arms around like a bird about to take flight. Taiga only groaned and pinched her eyes.

“You’re not allowed to skip school, Katsuko...”

“What about a parent’s letter?” Haruko added.

“You need a good reason to skip school... Ugh, you know what?” Taiga pointed firmly to the classroom. “Just go back to class. Don’t you dare go anywhere else.”

The two little girls obediently entered, rejoining their Math class. Once they were out of her sight, Taiga sighed and started marching down the corridor, the clacking of her heels echoing along the walls. She pulled out her phone and opened her contacts, pressing on her husband’s name and starting a call.

Mitsuko was on the train that went straight to Haneda Airport, sitting in the seat at the furthest end of the row. The train was almost empty, with only a few salary men and women, or mothers with their children spread out amongst the rows of seats. In the window ahead of her, she watched the blurred scenery quickly pass by. She couldn’t recognise any of the buildings or houses. It was like she was in another world. She watched the screens below the ceiling while she bit her lip, making sure she was going to the right place.

The train slowly came to a halt at another station. Mitsuko was shocked by the crowd of people standing outside. The doors drew open, letting the crowd flow into the train car. Her eyes darted everywhere like she was in a collapsing submarine as the car filled with people. The seats beside her were suddenly occupied. A dense wall of legs appeared in front of her, making her lift her feet onto her seat. It was like everything was closing in on her. If she made even a little sound, she might catch everyone’s attention. She trembled at the thought of moving through all those people. This stress caused her to curl up into a ball and stare into her lap, waiting for her surroundings to become less scary and cramped.

Ryuuji found himself standing at the opening leading between the underground train station and the airport. He watched commuters rise from the escalator ahead of him, hoping to see his daughter eventually appear. He held his phone in his hand, occasionally glancing at its screen, which displayed some kind of GPS app. Yasuko stood beside him, looking in the same direction he was.

“So Micchan is going to come through here, huh?” Yasuko asked.

“It’s a good thing we installed a location tracker on their phones. Otherwise, this would’ve turned into a police case,” Ryuuji sighed. “Well, Mitsuko is a smart girl. She knows how to take trains all by herself.”

“Has she always been acting out like this after I moved out?”

“Yeah. Taiga’s been trying to help her, but no matter what she does, she’s always thinking about you. I considered letting her visit maybe once a week, but what’s the point if



she's sad the rest of the time?" Ryuuji rested his palm against his forehead. "Ugh... I don't remember doing anything to make her afraid of me. Is it because I don't listen enough? She's tried speaking to me once but I couldn't understand her..."

"She's not difficult to understand, you know," Yasuko said. "It took me a bit of time to get in tune with her too. I tried my hardest to ensure that I wasn't missing a single thing she was saying. It reached a point where it was as if I was seeing Mitsuko on full display, like she was a radio show that I had been listening to since the first episode. But I never told her that I didn't understand her, I just told her what I did and, when she needed to, she would clarify. Maybe she just liked seeing that."

She leaned in to her son. "It's not too late for you to start listening too, you know."

Ryuuji looked into Yasuko's shiny eyes and huffed with a smirk. "I suppose you're right. I just need to try harder. She's my daughter, after all." He glanced at a digital clock mounted on a wall nearby. "Don't you have a flight to catch?"

"Oh, it's not for another few hours. Micchan's arriving soon, isn't she?"

"Well, the GPS says she's at the airport, but I haven't seen her pass through here. It might be a little longer before she does appear. Shouldn't you be with Taku-san and your parents? They must be waiting for you."

Yasuko flicked her hand. "Oh, they'll be fine. Taku-san needs a little alone time with my parents anyway. You know, just so they can get a little closer."

"Your dad already treats him like a son. I think they're already pretty close."

The mother and son chuckled. Suddenly, Yasuko lowered her voice.

"What do you think, Ryuu-chan?"

"About what?"

"About me and Taku-san. Is it okay if we get married? I really am considering it, you know, maybe sometime in the future. Would he make a good stepdad?" Yasuko said while she cheekily swayed her hips.

Ryuuji scratched the back of his head and blushed. "I don't know if I can really call him a 'stepdad'. I'm already a grown adult, so it's not like he'd need to parent me. But he's a good man, so I don't mind welcoming him into my life, and if it means you won't ever mention *my* dad again..."

"Oh, Ryuu-chan!~" Yasuko nudged her son's arm with her elbow, making him chuckle. "But you know that means I'd have less time for you, right? If my parents weren't around, I'd probably be travelling with him instead."

“Yasuko, I’ll be fine. You should be enjoying your time with Taku-san. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Alright, but...” Yasuko gently grasped Ryuuji’s hand. “You’re still my little boy, after all. Your approval is the thing I need the most.”

“Well, you gave me your approval to marry Taiga. It wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t give you the same. Besides...” Ryuuji rested his hand on her shoulder and gave her a toothy grin. “We all need to move on to newer people, don’t we?”

Yasuko’s soft smile stretched further. She couldn’t count on her hand the number of times she’d felt this warm satisfaction, seeing her little boy standing over her, not just as a grown man, but a father. Yet, every time it came to her, it was as if she was experiencing it for the first time again. It was always a pleasant reminder of how far she and her whole family had come.

“It’s crazy, isn’t it? The amount of time you’ve been in my life is almost equal to the amount of time my parents have.”

“I guess it is, but you’ve been in mine since the start.”

“And I’ll still be here if you need me.”

Yasuko felt her phone vibrate in her pocket, prompting her to pull it out. It was a message from Taku.

“Oh, my parents are heading into the departure hall! I need to go!” Yasuko said before turning around and walking off.

“Enjoy yourself in Singapore!” Ryuuji exclaimed as he waved to his mother. Yasuko happily waved back as she disappeared into a sea of people, all of whom had their own flights to catch. Ryuuji then continued to watch the train station’s exit, waiting for his daughter to appear amongst the airport visitors passing him by.

Yasuko walked briskly through the airport, her loafers clacking against the hard and shiny terrazzo flooring. The smile on her face couldn’t seem to fall off. Of course, there was just so much to be excited about. It wasn’t going to be long before she’d board a plane with her parents to their vacation destination. She just had a wonderful day with both her lover and her son, too. It was like she didn’t have a worry in the world.

Suddenly, her eyes widened. She spotted something ahead of her. Behind the little gaps between the arms and hands of all the strangers moving in front of her, she saw a glistening sliver of brunette hair. There was no doubt about it. The hair was the same colour

as her daughter-in-law's. No, that hair belonged to her granddaughter. When Yasuko focused, she made out the shape of her granddaughter's body.

There was Mitsuko, trudging through the crowd of people, glancing around nervously as she got overwhelmed by all the people towering over her. Her pace was much slower than everyone around her, prompting them to walk around her, like a rock in the centre of a flowing river. From where Yasuko stood, she could see her little nose and puffy cheeks were a soft red colour, while her big, doll-like eyes were becoming watery.

It seemed she had slipped past Ryuuji's line of sight to look for Yasuko. But when she spotted her granddaughter, Yasuko herself didn't worry. While there was some relief that Mitsuko had been found, she was more pleased to see her. It felt like ages since she'd seen her, after all. There was no way she could forget about her.

Yasuko took a hard step forward with a simper. Then another. And another. It didn't take long for her to catch up to the little girl. Even with the loud clacking of Yasuko's shoes, Mitsuko didn't think to turn around, allowing her to sneak up on her. Her smile grew wider and wider the closer she got without her granddaughter noticing.

Then, as she approached Mitsuko, she stretched her arms wide and started to bend her knee. Finally, once she was right behind her, she knelt down and pulled Mitsuko in for a hug. Mitsuko's eyes widened in surprise until Yasuko whispered in her ear.

"You missed me, didn't you, Micchan?"

Mitsuko quickly turned to look at Yasuko's smooth, soft face. The little girl's eyes were sparkling like a gemstone.

"Ya-chan..." She mumbled as she waited for the moment to set in. Yasuko gave her a grin, showing her white teeth. At that moment, Mitsuko could feel a smile slowly form on her face as well. "Ya-chaaaaaan!" She cried out as she buried her face in Yasuko's chest and returned her grandmother's warm embrace.

"I'm happy to see you too, Micchan," Yasuko said softly while she stroked her granddaughter's back. However, she suddenly felt her chest become warm and wet. She could hear muffled sniffing vibrate in it.

"Ya-chaaaaaan!" Mitsuko pulled her face away and cried out again, her face now dripping with tears. "Waaaaaaaah!" Her jaw fell as she opened her mouth wide to wail loudly. Her face was completely red like a tomato now as she let all her tears burst out. With her beloved grandmother in her presence, she didn't feel the need to hold back.

Yasuko calmly wiped the tears off Mitsuko's cheeks with her thumbs while she continued to give her a reassuring smile. Her little hands were gripping the front of her shirt tightly like an infant. The wet spot she left behind covered most of Yasuko's chest.

"Ya-chaan, Ya-chaan! At... At school..." Mitsuko stammered.

"Yes, Micchan?"

"At school... The other kids make fun of meeeee!" She squealed like a little piglet. "They... They..." She sniffled through her sentences. "They said... They said I'm too old for Panpandaaaa!" The tears just never stopped coming. "And... And... When I was on the train... I was... I was so scaaaaaared!" Suddenly, she wasn't talking about school anymore. "And... And... A boy stole my melon bread agaaaaain!" Then she returned to talking about school. The switch in topics happened after every sentence.

Yasuko continued to provide her granddaughter with her comforting gaze, stroking her hair and her neck to soothe her. Strangely, even though Mitsuko was talking about so many different things, Yasuko didn't misunderstand a single thing. She wasn't upset about all these individual incidents. She was just distressed by the distance that formed between them. It felt like so much had happened after Yasuko moved away.

However, the things that happened at school weren't out of the ordinary. In fact, they were normal for Mitsuko and her sisters. It's just that, without Yasuko around to comfort her, it felt like all the incidents were stacking on top of one another. Now that they had reunited, Mitsuko could fill her in. But Yasuko knew that after this trip, it would be just like when Yasuko had first moved away. Maybe they could still message each other, but Mitsuko needed to open herself up so she could grow.

Yasuko hugged her granddaughter while she stroked her back. "I'm so, so sorry you had to go through all that, Micchan..." She spoke with a voice as gentle as a summer's breeze. "Listen... You are one of the smartest girls I've ever met. No matter what people do to you or say about you, you are capable of so much... I mean, you even came all the way here by yourself. I'd say you're the bravest a girl your age can be."

Yasuko pulled herself away and held Mitsuko's soft little cheeks in her hands like she would with an antique vase. She looked into her granddaughter's eyes, which were like two pieces of polished topaz. "It must've been so difficult without me around. Right, Micchan?" Mitsuko nodded while her face rested in Yasuko's hands. "I'm sorry I didn't read all your messages, Micchan. You must've been so upset. The truth is that I was having some trouble of my own, but that doesn't mean it was right to ignore you."

“Ya-chan has trouble of her own?” Mitsuko asked faintly. It seemed the river of tears had come to a halt after she felt the warmth of her grandmother’s palms against her face.

“Oh, Micchan, everyone does. I’m just a normal person like everyone else.” Yasuko wiped off the last bit of tears still on Mitsuko’s cheeks. “But that also means I’m not the only one capable of loving you, Micchan.” Yasuko’s hands fell to Mitsuko’s hands like a feather. She clasped both of them together. “There’s going to be a time when I won’t be around to help you. You know it all too well, don’t you?”

Yasuko’s fingers stroked the back of Mitsuko’s little hands. “But there is always someone that will be there to comfort you. It won’t always be me. But in order for that to be true, you have to open yourself to other people. You have to give them a chance to understand what’s happening. You can’t just keep to yourself all the time. Can you promise me you’ll do that, Micchan?”

“Nn...” Mitsuko whined softly. As much as she wanted to give Yasuko assurance, she just couldn’t say “yes” to her request. However, Yasuko wasn’t irritated by her granddaughter’s hesitance one bit.

“Was there ever anyone else that made you happy, Micchan? Or, maybe they made you feel safe? As long as there’s someone out there that’s made you feel good, I’m sure you’ll find your way. Don’t you think so, Micchan?” She asked.

Sure enough, there were more people that made her feel good, but she didn’t think any of them compared to Yasuko. It was so much easier just talking to her. It felt like she could say whatever to her and do whatever with her, without having any second thoughts. But no matter what she did, she just wasn’t allowed to continue holding onto this person that made everything easier. She had to let go. Mitsuko nodded, leading Yasuko to widen her smile. She embraced Mitsuko one last time and whispered in her ear.

“I know that, once you’ve found that person, everything will be alright. But even then, I promise I won’t ever forget about you. I can still answer your messages, you know.” Finally, she lifted her granddaughter into her arms. “Now, let’s head to the departure hall.” Mitsuko sat in her arms silently while Yasuko carried her through the crowd of people.

Eventually, Ryuuji was the one carrying Mitsuko instead. Alongside Taku, the two of them waved enthusiastically at Yasuko and her parents as they walked towards the departure hall checkpoint. Mitsuko’s face was still a little red and she was still silent after sobbing. But she still gave her beloved grandmother an energetic sendoff.

After getting through the baggage check, Yasuko trailed behind her parents, who were happily chattering about what they were going to do during the six-hour plane ride to their

destination. As she admired her parents who were so full of energy from behind, she felt a smile as bright as the sun form on her face. It seemed that after all the troubling months of worrying about her parents, everything turned out alright in the end. The fateful day her parents would leave her was much further in the future than she believed. Until then, she was going to enjoy every single moment with them to the fullest.

With great hopes for herself and her family, which included her parents, her children and her grandchildren, this difficult period in her life would come to an end. She strutted forward with anticipation for what wonderful memories would await her.

Ryuuji returned home with Mitsuko holding his hand. Once they stepped through the front door, they were greeted by Taiga, leaning her back against the wall. Her arms were crossed and she was tapping her finger. Mitsuko felt her legs stiffen when her eyes met her mother's naturally fierce glare.

"You're in big trouble, Mitsuko," Taiga growled. She stepped in front of her husband and daughter, looking down at her little girl sternly. Mitsuko tried to hide behind her father's tall legs, but he nudged her forward to face her mother instead.

"Come on, Mitsuko. She won't bite," Ryuuji said softly. As she stood in front of her mother, Mitsuko let her eyes drift about, looking anywhere but her mother's face. Her legs had turned to jelly. Taiga paid no mind to this.

"You understand what you did wrong, right?" Taiga spoke firmly.

Mitsuko nodded, her head jittering.

"Do you feel sorry for what you did?"

Mitsuko nodded again.

"And you won't ever do it again?"

Mitsuko nodded like a bobbing duck. Finally, Taiga got on her knees to her daughter's level. She tried to look calmly into Mitsuko's eyes, but they still avoided her.

"Were you scared?" She asked gently. Mitsuko sniffled before nodding again. She shamefully gripped her dress tightly and looked at the floor.

"Oh, Mitsuko..."

Suddenly, Mitsuko felt a familiar warmth as her mother leaned forward and wrapped her arms around her body, pulling her in for a pleasant embrace.

"I'm so glad you're safe..." Taiga mumbled while she stroked her daughter's hair. As Mitsuko was engulfed by her mother's body heat, she quickly felt at ease. Her mother's tiger-like fierceness had disappeared like mist. Now, she was being coddled in her mother's

arms as if she were in a gently rocking cradle. Mitsuko rested her chin on Taiga's shoulder and closed her eyes as she returned her mother's hug.

Maybe, for once, there wasn't a need to worry about how far Yasuko was or when she was going to see her again. Maybe, every time she got home, she didn't need to worry about whether there was going to be someone there to care for her, because there always was. Maybe, in a time of need or just when she's feeling down, her father and her sisters would extend the same love her mother did.

Maybe she wasn't as alone as she thought she was.

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*Riiip.*

"K-Katsuko! That dress is expensive!"

"But this fits my style more!"

"Seriously? You look like a bum!"

"Oh, shut up, Haruko. You look like an uptight bitch."

"What did you call me!?"

"Hey, hey!"

Mitsuko crouched with her arms out like a scarecrow as she sat between her sisters and pushed them away while they flicked their arms and tried to slap each other. The three sisters were in a dainty changing room filled with antique furniture lined with LEDs. They were noticeably taller, with much more mature bodies, a natural occurrence for junior high school students. Mitsuko eyed the straight tear Katsuko made in her pitch black dress. The three of them were wearing identical outfits, but the tear that went up her leg made her look out of place. Then, her eyes lit up when an idea popped into her head.

"Waaaaait!" Mitsuko yelled, prompting her sisters to cease their struggle. "Okay, let's forget about the price of the dress. I think Katsuko could look good even with the tear. After all, Ya-chan really likes it when we all have our own styles."

Sure enough, Mitsuko's dress was more frilly compared to Haruko's straight dress. Their waists were lined with fabric roses; Mitsuko's were light pink, Haruko's were a deep red, and Katsuko's were black. It would make sense for Katsuko to take her own liberties with how she presented herself.

“Hehe! That’s right! I can do the really cool leg thing like this!” Katsuko exclaimed pompously. She stepped her leg outward so the tear in her dress would open up to reveal her thigh. She posed like a model, with a hand on her head and another on her hip.

“But haven’t I already told you two to stop calling each other names!?” Mitsuko yelled again, pointing her fingers at both her sisters.

“S-sorry, Mitsuko...” Both Haruko and Katsuko apologised in sync, scratching their heads shamefully.

“Whatever, today is a special day, so let’s forget about fighting!” Mitsuko exclaimed as she took her sisters’ hands and started marching towards the door. Her sisters followed along. “Onwards, to Ya-chan’s wedding!”

“Yeah!” Haruko and Katsuko cheered together. They entered the fancy-looking, warmly lit corridor and marched without once letting go of one another.

“Hey, since Ya-chan’s getting married, does that mean we have to go by Kurasawa?”

“Oh, Taku-san is actually taking Ya-chan’s name,” Mitsuko explained to Katsuko.

“So we’re still going by Takasu...”

“Oh yeah... You know that book I bought you last time? There was one character that did that when he got married.”

“Wait, Haruko, you read?” Mitsuko asked her sister.

“I don’t like reading that much, but I had to make sure that book was appropriate. Mom would probably get angry if there were dirty things in there.”

“Ooh, who’s your favourite character?”

“I think it was—”

“Wait, you got Mitsuko a book!? Hey, I read books too, you know!”

“The last book you read was the last volume of Jujutsu Kaisen...” Haruko sneered.

“Still a book!”

“A book where people just punch and kick each other all the time?”

“It’s more than that!”

“Is it?”

“What did I just say?” Mitsuko interrupted.

“Sorry...” Her two sisters apologised in unison again.