

Kumori and the Day of a Thousand Feelings"

Kumori flails dramatically, nearly toppling off her bed. She awakes to the sound of her alarm—except, to her, it's not just a sound. It's an explosion. A wailing, screeching fire-engine siren that zaps her brain like a bolt of lightning.

"IT BEGINS," she whispers to herself.

Mornings are a battlefield. First, the clothes.

Socks? A disaster. The socks feel like sandpaper.

"Why do socks have seams? WHO INVENTED THIS TORTURE?" she wails.

Her mum sighs and hands her the special seamless socks they ordered online. "You know, most people just wear the ones from the shop," she says with a wink.

Kumori limply flops onto the floor. "I am not most people."

The collar of my shirt is too tight. The school uniform has the texture of a thousand fiery needles. The tag at the back of my shirt is a tiny blade, scratching against my neck with every movement. I cut it off, but the sensation lingers, an invisible itch that no amount of rubbing will erase.

Everything about my uniform is wrong. The fabric traps heat, clings to my skin, suffocates me. Every step, every shift, every breath makes me hyper-aware of the material against my body.

To survive, I wear my favourite tight-fitting T-shirt underneath. It's like a constant hug, a layer of comfort against the outside world. Without it, I'd unravel before the day even begins.

And then, the shoes. Heavy. Stiff. A prison for my feet. The laces must be tied exactly right—not too tight, not too loose. If one lace is even slightly uneven, I will have to start over. And over. And over. It's as if I'm stuck in a Goldilocks moment. Even after all the adjustments, my body still itches with discomfort.

Breakfast is the next challenge. Certain textures make my stomach turn. Crunchy cereal feels like gravel in my mouth, and eggs are too slimy. Best stick to my safe food—peanut butter on toast, no crusts, cut into perfect squares. Anything else is a gamble.

The walk to school is a jungle of sensations, a never-ending obstacle course where each step brings a new challenge. Car engines rev, the screech of bus brakes cuts through the air like a knife; a distant dog barks—a sharp, repetitive sound that feels like it's bouncing inside my skull. Every sound collides like a cymbal crash, layering over one another until my brain feels like it's going to short-circuit.

I press my hands over my ears, but the noises seep through anyway. The crossing light beeps, an urgent, repetitive beep-beep-beep that makes my muscles clench. It's as if someone has dropped fireworks into my brain, each burst ricocheting inside me, leaving behind a sharp, crackling tension. My heart races, my breath quickens. I whisper to myself, *'Just keep moving. One step at a time.'*

My fingers search frantically for my headphones in my backpack, running over the familiar fabric of the case. They are my shield, my armour against the unpredictable world. I don't even need to put them on yet—just knowing they are there is enough.

The footpath beneath me shifts from warm, bumpy concrete to an unexpected patch of cool, damp grass. The moment my shoe sinks into the moisture, an involuntary shudder runs through me. It's too much. My body holds onto the sensation long after I've stepped back onto the pavement, the ghost of the wetness lingering on my skin like a phantom touch.

A gust of wind whips my hair across my face, each strand tickling and scratching like a hundred tiny insect legs. I rub my arms quickly, trying to erase the feeling, but the sensation lingers, crawling over me long after the wind has died down.

And then, the sunlight. Too bright, too sharp, too much. It pierces through my closed eyelids, leaving swirling patterns behind my eyes. I wish I could wear sunglasses, but that would make me stand out. And I don't want to stand out, any more than I do anyway.

The school gates are ahead. I can hear the dull roar of children chattering, the rhythmic thump-thump of a handball, the high-pitched squeal of children already in their friendship groups. Each sound fights for dominance, piling on top of the others like an orchestra with no conductor.

I swallow hard. One more step. And then another. I've made it!

Inside the classroom is a minefield of distractions. The overhead lights flicker and hum—a noise most people don't even notice, but I do. It's a high-pitched buzz, constant, relentless, like a mosquito trapped inside my skull. The fluorescent glow is too sharp, slicing into my vision, making my head pound.

The fan whirs. The clock ticks. Pencils scrape against paper. Every sound, every movement, every shift in light builds up until my brain feels like an overstuffed filing cabinet, unable to take in anything new.

Kumori slides into her seat just as the school bell rings—another auditory ambush. The fluorescent lights flicker, their buzzing sound rattling her skull. She squints as she tries to focus.

The teacher is talking about fractions, but Kumori is busy trying to ignore the BOOM, BOOM, BOOM of someone bouncing their leg under the desk. The boy behind her smells like twenty different types of shampoo. The girl beside her keeps whispering to herself.

Kumori grips her squishy toy like it's a life raft.

A tap on her shoulder. "Why do you always squeeze that thing?" a classmate asks.

Kumori shrugs. "Why do you blink?"

The classmate frowns. "Because I have to."

Kumori nods. "Same."

When it's time to write, Kumori's hands struggle to hold the pencil properly. The pressure must be just right—not too hard, not too soft. Her teacher offers a pencil grip, and it helps a little. But the words still swim on the page, letters flipping and moving when she tries to focus.

The teacher is speaking, but the words slip through the cracks, lost in the chaos of the background noise. I try to focus, but it's like trying to catch raindrops in a sieve.

I bounce my leg. Tap my fingers. Wiggle my toes. My body must move. But the teacher frowns. *"Sit still. Pay attention."*

How can I pay attention when my body is screaming for movement?

I need to get out.

I look forward to getting outside to play and move. That's if I can get outside! Sometimes when I have chosen a game and a play friend, they decide to play a different game with others and just go off, so easily.

Woah!! I can't change just like that! I have to re-adjust somehow. Where can I go for playtime?

Playtime to me is a whirl of movement. Arms flail, backpacks swing, bodies dart past in a blur. Voices overlap—some shouting, some whispering, some laughing too loudly. It's like standing in the eye of a storm, except there's no calm centre—just endless motion, endless sound, endless unpredictability.

I press my fingertips together, tapping them in a pattern only I know. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. The rhythm is my anchor, the thing that keeps me tethered to the present when everything around me feels like it's spinning out of control.

Then the smells hit. Leftover spaghetti in a lunchbox. The sharp, artificial scent of a teacher's perfume. The damp, earthy smell of grass from the morning dew. Each scent is distinct, overwhelming, battling for attention in my already overloaded brain.

I scan the outside searching for my safe people—the ones who won't mind if I stand a little too close, who won't get annoyed if I talk about the same topic for too long. But today, I don't see them. My chest tightens, my throat closes. The world tilts slightly, the edges of my vision blurring.

I push myself outside the classroom.

I stand on the edge of the playground, watching.

I want to play. Really, I do. But the game they're playing involves chasing and touching, and that's... a lot.

A boy named Leo approaches. "Wanna build a fort?"

I blink. "What kind of fort?"

Leo gestures toward the trees. "A leaf fort. No loud noises. Just building."

My heart lifts. I nod.

For the next ten minutes, we stack leaves and sticks. It's quiet. It's calm. It's perfect.

Then, disaster.

A girl runs by and accidentally kicks our masterpiece over. Leo just shrugs and starts rebuilding.

I, on the other hand, feel my whole body tense. A lump rises in my throat. The world spins sideways. My hands start flapping. My breathing gets funny.

A meltdown is coming.

Leo notices. "Hey," he says gently. "It's okay. We can make it even better. Maybe with a moat."

I gulp air. I squeeze my squishy toy. I rock on my heels.

"Moat?" I whisper.

Leo grins. "Yeah. A leaf moat. The biggest one ever."

Slowly, the world rights itself. The hurricane inside me calms.

"Okay," I say. "But we need way more leaves."

Some kids get it. Like Leo and Zara.

Zara, who asks if I want to play a quiet game under the tree. Zara, who doesn't flinch when I jump at a loud noise. Zara, who listens when I explain that some things feel *too much*. Zara sees the treasure beneath the surface. She sees me.

The school is trying too. There's a quiet corner with beanbags, sensory paths for stomping out energy, and lessons about differences. Some kids listen. Some don't. But things are changing, little by little.

Then, the bell rings. But it's not just a sound—it's a jolt, a shockwave, a thunderclap that rattles through my entire body. I brace myself, inhaling sharply, holding onto the breath as if it can shield me from the noise.

Back in class, it's silent reading time. I love books, but sitting still is... problematic. I tap my fingers. Bounce my leg. Chew on my hoodie string. Anything to keep from bursting out of my chair.

The teacher kneels beside me. "Would it help if you sat on the wobble cushion?"

I nod eagerly. I move to a special cushion that lets me rock gently while I read. Bless this cushion. It is magic!

During group work, I listen to the others talk, but joining in feels impossible. I have so many thoughts, but they tangle in my head. By the time I'm ready to speak, the conversation has already moved on.

I write my ideas down instead. The teacher sees my note and gives me a thumbs-up. That makes me feel better.

The final bell rings. I sprint to the school gate, exhausted but victorious. Another day survived. Another battle won.

As I walk home, I spot a kid from my class looking sad. He's sitting alone, staring at his shoes.

I pause. Then, I rummage in my pocket and pull out my squishy toy.

"Want a turn?" I ask.

The boy hesitates, then takes it. He gives it a squeeze. His shoulders relax.

I grin. Maybe he's not 'most people' either.

And that, I think, is the best kind of people to be.

At home, I collapse onto my bed. My room is my sanctuary—dim lighting, soft blankets, no unexpected noises. I burrow under the covers and sigh. The day was hard, but I made it.

My mum peeks in. "Proud of you, kiddo."

I smile. "Me too."

Not everyone sees my unique brilliance right away. But if you take the time to look, really look, you'll see that my brain works in ways others might not understand.

Neurodivergent kids like me see patterns where others see randomness. We think 'outside the box.' We remember tiny details that others overlook. We make connections that no one else sees.

I might need extra time to answer questions. I might need my comfort toy. I might laugh loudly at things that seem random. I might talk too much about my favourite topic.

But if you take the time to know me, you'll see that my quirks are my strengths.

The world is made up of all kinds of brains—neurotypical and neurodiverse. And when we understand each other, when we make space for different ways of thinking, we make the world a better place.

So next time you see someone flapping, spinning, or covering their ears, don't judge. Don't laugh.

Instead, smile. Ask if they want to join in and play so we can learn from each other. Because we all belong here, together.