

Euphoric Fallout

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I awaken from my comatose-esque state. The sound of mild traffic reverberates through my head. A sound that had fallen on deaf ears. I get up from the floor of my studio and scramble for my phone. I switch on the big lights, and something grinds my movements to a halt.

The walls of my studio apartment. They're a mess.

The paint had gone far past the multitude of canvasses, and made its way onto the surface of the walls. Hell... it's not just the walls. The windows as well. For the life of me, I could not tell the time. Wait. Time. Time. Time... right! My phone! Ugh, how could I have forgotten something I wanted to do literally seconds ago? Oh, it was in my pocket. This whole time. So, it's 9:00 PM, and the date reads 'September 8th, 2022.' I have 17 missed calls, and one, two... too many texts from various people. My mom, cousin, siblings, miscellaneous friends or 'acquaintances,' et cetera.

And one notable text chain. My agent, Steph.

03:07 PM. “Hey! It’s Steph. It has been a month since you’ve last given me a status update. How are you doing? How’s the project coming along? We need to talk, actually.”

03:21 PM. “Hello?”

03:34 PM. “Sami? You awake?”

04:02 PM. “Hon... I’m worried about you.”

04:35 PM. “The pandemic has been over for three months now and you still haven’t been outside. We did agree to a month extension, thankfully we’ve arranged everything to be spick and span, but god COMMUNICATE PLEASE.”

05:22 PM. “I’m right outside. Rang the doorbell for god knows how long. No answer. I get that this whole isolation thing is sort of part of the artistic process, pursuit of ‘artistic euphoria’ and all, but god.”

05:52 PM. “I’ve waited here for 30 minutes. If I don’t see you in 5, I have a dinner appointment uptown.”

05:57 PM. “God or whoever’s up there, I hope you’re not dead. Call me back if you’re awake. I gotta go.”

Oh god... did I pass out for the entire day? Right, I have to call her. Right now. The dialling sound feels like it's taking hold of my breathing. Pick up, pick up, pick up... she doesn't pick up. Damn it. I slump down against the wall. What now? At the very least, I text her back. "I'm not dead." Before I can continue though, my phone dies. I don't feel like waiting for my phone to charge. No. Not really. What I do feel is hunger. I gaze at the door to the great outside. I can't order food with my phone like this. Do I have to eat out?

I sigh. Fine. After scrounging around for my keys, I turn the door handle slowly, fingers ever so aware of hesitation. It clicks and the door opens and with it, the sounds of traffic and the city itself become louder. More present.

I'm now outside. I've got my address written down on my wallet. I should be fine if I get lost. The streets are bustling with cars. The stars above are invisible, behind dark clouds and haze. With each step I take, every neon sign I pass by, each stranger I neglect to greet and leave be, an indescribable feeling wells up. Like a burden has been lifted, but what will take its place? Well, there's another thing. My eyes feel rested. More rested than they have been for an eternity, it feels like.

My two legs come to a stop in front of a gas station. A restaurant, for some reason, stands where a convenience store would normally be. A small Japanese restaurant with doors still open. Why? The parking lot seems sparse, if not empty. Only a single old Toyota is parked there. Very old. An interesting deep maroon. I've walked quite a distance, might as well dine here. I open the door, and a smooth jazzy wave unique to vintage City Pop greets my tired ears. "Hello?"

"Yo." A man reading a newspaper replies from behind the counter. I feel warmer already. It's a counter style diner. Wooden flooring and snug-fitting chairs recall the comfort of a lived-in home, and the low cityscape looms gently behind the aged glass windows. The act of simply sitting down feels like a hug from a distant yet loving relative. Everything from vintage Toyota ads to calligraphy hangs on the walls, clashing yet making perfect sense. A vinyl record player hidden in the corner seems to be the source of the music.

"What'll you have?" the lone chef asks, after putting down his paper.

A closer look reveals a moustached older gentleman, at least in his early to mid 40s, wearing an old—what are they called?—Japanese style clothing, but with an apron and a white bandana tied to his head. Considering he's the only one running this establishment, he should be tired, but apparently not. His face reminds me a little bit of the Boss canned coffee logo.

"Hello? Kid? Anyone home?"

"What's on the menu?"

He hands me a single laminated sheet of paper. No pictures on the items listed at all. No nothing. Just text describing food and ingredients. There's ramen, of course, various rice dishes like beef bowls and katsu-don, no sushi though. "What can you recommend?"

"I have leftover rice and curry from yesterday. Half-off if you order curry katsu."

"Wait, why?"

"I don't like wasting food," he says, making eye contact. "Besides... you look like you need it."

I hate to admit it, but he has a point. A glance at my wallet is enough for me to wince. I nod. He nods back, and starts cooking. While I wait, I just sit there. Absorbing a moment. Something that I missed, if I'm honest.

"Huh, Mariya Takeuchi," I blurt out by accident. "Yup," the bossman answers. "Nice tune, isn't it?" he adds.

"This song's everywhere on the internet."

"Haha, I know. Not an answer to my question though," He chuckles.

"I prefer her husband's work."

"Oh, Tats Yamashita is great! Mari's single Plastic Love gets more recognition, and if I'm honest that's why I play her often here. I want folks to be at home, y'know? But Ride On Time is such a great album, I should definitely put him on more often."

"Nothing wrong with mixing it up now and then."

"You know what, you're right."

On second thought though, Tatsuro's work is more daytime/afternoon music. This, however, is perfect for our late hour. While drifting off to the music, I find myself drawn to bossman himself. His body language fascinates me—full of life, yet not a single drop of energy wasted with unnecessary movements. The dish is quick, but I can tell he's a pro. The ratio of rice to chicken, the way he pours the curry and vegetables. It's perfect. And the smell... mmmmm.

"Here you go."

He hands over the understated masterpiece of a meal. A spoon, fork, or chopsticks ready for me to use. My hands are exhausted already, so I go for the spoon-fork combo.

“Thank you.”

“Got a name, kid?”

“Sami.”

“Ken. Pleasure.”

We shake hands, his grasp gentle yet firm. A smile forms on the older man’s face. I can’t help but loosen a smile in return as well. I then dig in, to quench my hunger. The taste of the first spoonful of curry-marinated rice and chicken... how do I describe this—this feeling? It feels like every muscle within my body is relaxing after an eternity’s worth of work, and I can’t help but cry.

“Feel better, Sami?” He asks.

“You have no idea. It’s—”

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. Words aren’t necessary here. Let the food communicate to you.”

I nod and continue with my meal. I notice him switching records on his player. The opening track for “Ride On Time”, “Someday” begins playing. That little gesture, this meal, this atmosphere.

It’s the closest I feel to whatever the hell I was chasing. Actually, maybe not. Maybe this is what I needed all along.