

Cue to Conformity

Monotony over took her culture to the point of no return. The way she breathed, washed her hair, interacted with peers, spoke with her family, communicated with her fiancé; day after day was in reflection of the last.

Her grey-clouded eyes glanced across the room, barely catching any one object or person. Her focus was streamed to the point of habit, and motivation was out of the question; motivation was not an option. She did as she was told and followed orders - as if following life through a script. She was a hammered down nail, a bit of glue holding together the durable glass society.

Her interest in breaking her hold was neither desired nor delusional, but a distant thought until given the platform.

Friday night came along and I walked to the community bar, ordered the usual, took a seat by my drunken co-workers, and partook in useless conversation. Just as I had finished the last sip of my second Suntory Whiskey, she walked in. Her underdressed beauty made my blazer and pencil skirt look shabby. Her wide eyes were of those not even a passionate kawaii could replicate, and her lips were redder than the rose she gingerly carried in her hand. She made her way to the pool table and the men nearby openly ogled her as she took a cue and angled herself to make the most precise bank shot. After flashing a smile and wink in their direction, she walked towards the bar, just to the right of my karaoke obsessed colleagues. Nestling herself between a seemingly gloomy man and myself, she ordered a drink.

“You play billiards?” she inquired with a twinkle in her eye and undeniably smooth.

I looked down at my shaky hands and replied, “I suppose it is possible for me to try, but I doubt I could do more than nail someone with my unskilled aim.” I couldn’t help but picture myself giving the game a go, and then go too far. Imagining the eight ball flying across the room on a pair of wings and right into the drink of a yakuza.

“You will never know till you give it a shot - pun intended,” she counter argued with the same wink, then looking me up and down. “I like the expression you’re going for.”

“Exhausted, lonely, overworked thirty-year-old?”

“No, I see you more as a responsible soul just waiting for an excuse to be daring.”

I stared back, and couldn’t help but picture my to do list: Go to work. Buy food. Clean sink. Read book. Call fiancé. Iron clothes. Fold towels.

The most exciting activity on that list would be ironing clothes. A nice crease makes my day— on that thought maybe I do need a little more action in my life...

And somehow between those thoughts I found myself walking towards the pool table.

“What is your name?”

“Name? Well that isn’t important now is it, Aiko.”

“Wait, how -“

“I do my research, hun. Now grab a cue and let’s play.”

I fumbled with the cue stick for a moment and watched as she set the game, and then offered for me to break. Positioning myself at the end of the table, I leaned in a bit to close and gripped the cue in a way that worked friction against my intention. Barely allowing the triangular structure to break away, but at least I managed to do that – she did not look impressed or surprised.

“So tell me about work. I like to hear stories of a habitual lifestyle,” she started while guiding the striped balls along the table with the precision of a samurai.

“Um, well I have a desk job. Eight to seven and a small lunch break in between – it isn’t anything special, but it brings the rice to the table.”

“And you came here to waste the last few hours of the day before going to bed and doing it all over again?”

“Excuse me?” The cue ball *clacked* into the seven and sent it straight into the corner.

“Don’t take it the wrong way – I am sure cubicles are great,” sarcasm poured out of her red lips, rose now behind her ear.

“Yeah, I suppose. I have worked there for many years, I don’t know where else I would go, I just—”

“You just don’t have to go anywhere else?”

“Pardon? I don’t understand...”

“I left my office job years ago,” three ball smashed in left middle, “I wasn’t a fan. One day I simply stood up and left.”

“Do you regret it?”

Suppressing a giggle she responded, “The only thing I regret is leaving my novel in the desk drawer and not throwing it through the window on my way out – you wouldn’t believe the lack of vitamin D in that place.” She let out a shiver in memory as she hopped onto the edge of the table, cue stick behind her back, and making a perfect English, leading the two into the one and the one into the back corner.

I cannot leave my job though, what else would I do? I don’t know anything else and I will be married soon. My life is proceeding with the next level of responsibility and commitment.

She pulled the rose from behind her ear, caressed the petals for a moment, and then set it on the smooth wooden rim of the table. A petal fell to the green velvet and bled against the table; her cue clattered to the floor and her swift fingers plucked the petal from the table. Her eyes flashed to mine, lips fading to a softer pink, and she spoke in a whisper, “Come with me.”

“But the game- ” I half said when I glanced at the table and realized the game was over. She had successfully made every shot clean and precise, leaving only the cue and the eight ball perfectly lined up for a classic billiard.

“Do you have any books in your desk?”

Thinking back to my metal box and mentally opening the drawers one by one, I remembered the only objects I would leave at the office are files and a small mug for tea. I never brought books to work – I simply did not have time to read. But then I realized that might not be her true question.

“Why do you ask?”

“If someone would have come to me the night before I stormed out and reminded me to bring my novel, the thought of throwing it out the window would have been reality.”

“Or perhaps a realization. I doubt you would vandalize an office space. Others work there too.”

“You don’t even know,” she said holding her rose, “Sometimes people regret leaving things or people behind, and others they regret not standing up for what needed to be said.”

“Did other people in your office feel the same way?”

“No, this was my own battle. Needless to say, the company and I did not agree.”

“So, you regret the opportunity to throw the book, not the book itself?”

“I regret many things, darling. Awareness can be a powerful tool.”

“Regretting can be a tool too?”

“Hmm... perhaps not the word I would use,” she muttered looking down at her precious rose. Energy began to rise in her and her grip tightened, the thorns seemingly cut into her delicate palm and blood and petals fused. Her lips grew rosier and her eyes wider. Her eyes followed from my flats to my blazer to my eyes, blood trickling from her fingertips and onto her stockings. “At the end of the day, I do not agree with conformity. The thought of similarity kills me. I left my home young. Some were convinced I joined the hikikomori, some thought the yakuza had my soul. Some thought I committed seppuku, I always was a fan of the samurai blades... but no. Death wouldn’t fix anything. Death would prolong my cycle of unfortunate obedience. Do you ever think about how you live day to day exactly the same? Does the thought of remembering five years ago as yesterday kill you because you know nothing eventful has happened in between?”

They said it was a troublesome teenage phase. Eventually I was lost. I found myself stumbling off the shinkansen in Tokyo with no food and three yen to my name. At that point, I had to go back. I integrated myself into society again. I lived through literature. I convinced myself vicarious living was better than not living at all. This lasted five years. One day after finishing a book- the book- for the third time I looked down at my black business wear and then back up to my screen. I decided enough had been enough and I stormed out.”

We stared at each other for a long moment, then her words settled and I felt alienated; I saw myself from the outside perspective, as if my being and life were there and my mind was floating in space. My mind looked down at my body; it saw a woman

with bags under her eyes and not enough laugh lines. It saw years of ‘better not’s and ‘should have’s. Years of society-conscious decisions, years of convincing into conformity, convincing into love. My mind saw years wasted, and abruptly it was back – but morphed.

My eyes searched the room and I noticed the Suntory bottles reflecting the dim light, I noticed the clicking of heels and cue balls, I noticed the woman in front of me, and I noticed I no longer had to be the nail and glue in society.

She smirked back at me and gave me a wink, “Welcome. I could not help but see myself in you as I walked over to the bar. Please forgive my rash behaviors,” she winked.

“Just remember regrets are because we are jealous of what could have been ours and this emotion is pointless. Awareness on the other hand fuels us to make these decisions.

“Some are due to quick realizations and others as like finding that old way of ironing a shirt. You may forget to use that technique once or twice and then for weeks and months, and one day you will discover it again.

“You will wonder why you ever stopped in the first place, and no matter the technique you use from that day forward, you will always remember what you could do that instead.”