

Money, Time, and Other Illusions

by ty (*bucketfish*)

Remi stared, uncomprehending, at a cream envelope sitting pristinely on her desk. It seemed out of place with the rest of her belongings that were strewn about the room; a threadbare woollen sweater draped across the back of her chair, windswept papers lying haphazardly across the floor.

The walk back from her twelve-hour shift at the food factory sent her skidding down dreary, icy roads, and her fingers were frozen from the sharp winter wind, tinged pink, reeking of oils and seasonings. She had half a mind to ignore the letter and slump into the soft respite of her blankets.

The other half of her itched to punch the living daylights out of whoever broke into her house to steal her meagre stash of savings — just seven more years for a one-way ticket out of this town! — and then left a letter out of guilt.

Yet, a secret non-euclidean third half — one should never assume anything, least of all that two halves should add to one whole — hoped that it was some form of divine, angelic aid, a miracle that would get her out of the Sisyphean hellhole she had come to reluctantly accept was her life. A calling from a fairy godmother, a request from a prince in a distant kingdom seeking her hand in marriage, or even — it crossed her mind in a disgusted shudder, for she dared not admit that she enjoyed the world of a book with pre-teen audiences — a letter of acceptance to Hogwarts, perhaps?

Remi took a deep breath. Nothing else seemed to be touched. A frown creased her brows; she gingerly stepped closer to the offending envelope, careful not to topple the cup of paint water that stood in solitude in the otherwise-barren center of her room. There were fingernail indents on her palm when she brought her hand up to inspect the envelope.

The material was smooth to her touch, thick, and so cold it was almost metallic. When she raised it to the light, it glimmered in a slyly iridescent way, its edges wavering in violets and pinks.

Something that she would once call *hope* warmed her chest, but Remi prided herself on being realistic and pragmatic, so perhaps she would call it more of a *slight curiosity*.

Gently, she held the envelope and laid it down on her bed, kicking aside a discarded can of soda on her way there. Her legs curled up into a criss-cross-apple-sauce and distantly, as if within a dream, a hazy kindergarten memory floated through her mind, a piercing reminder of a lovelier, friendlier time.

Ever since the godforsaken Eliza Inc. grew in monopoly market power, forming a trans-continental corporation so large, so profitable that anti-trust laws could not touch it — and why would they, when it provided all those born in the upper class a lifetime of flawless, untouched technological ease as long as the poor worked behind the scenes to maintain it all? — her hometown has turned into human factory grounds. It was easy to enforce: they did not have the means to communicate with each other, even if someone had the *mind* to start a revolt.

And god, she had wanted to. But who would listen to a frail 27-year-old who was incapable of progressing beyond the lowest rung of the corporate ladder, incapable of even keeping her apartment clean?

At least she had an apartment of her own.

Remi's fingers trembled as they peeled open the envelope seal. Inside was a single sheet of printer paper, sloppily folded, and a flimsy, opaque ziploc bag. She picked up the letter and blinked to clear her vision.

dear remi,

How did they know her name?

i am you from the future. you'll be okay.

That did not sound real to her.

i snuck into eliza inc's new factory, lmao. they were making experimental time machines. can you believe it? i overheard their password while mopping the floors so i thought i'd see how it's going inside. they're not so genius, after all: their passcode is Password1. you'd think top-notch scientists have some more common sense?

Remi chuckled, then she was shocked by her laughter.

once they get this thing out to the public we'll all be stuck in a time loop working for them, and they've got infinite food and electricity — without needing to care about hospitals and deaths and childbirths. what a shame.

we still don't have much now, but hyperinflation happened a couple of years down the road. should've seen it coming, the way they gobbled up everything like pigs. there should be enough money in this plastic bag — but to me it's just loose change.

There was a stuttering in her chest that grew louder at each word, a mix of dread and fear and beneath it all — something delicate and glistening, so quiet that if she named it it might flit away.

The rest of the letter was filled with pointers and notes. Invest in Eliza Inc. as soon as possible, but also diverge into SoSpeed and Dyda. Find a place to live with internet access and upskill, retrain, learn the jobs of assistants. Remi also found a cleanly printed list of passwords for the admin systems in Eliza Inc., with elevator codes and descriptions of secret passageways.

The letter ended cheerily, and she anxiously opened the plastic bag from the envelope.

A wad of cash — thick as her palm. She started counting. When she reached ten thousand dollars, the amount she had chanted over and over again, the goal in her mind that kept her sane through the past decade, her ears started ringing. At twenty thousand, dizzying lights danced in her eyes. It kept going — she could now afford two, ten, fifty times of the ticket she was saving for. She could get out of there. She could finally live again. It was all *real*.

For the first time in ten years, hope blossomed in her chest, light and airy, bright and golden, like the first dandelion breaking through the cracks of a worn pavement, reaching for the warmth of a summer sky.