

# Escapism

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*When there's nothing in life worth living for, where do you turn? For Jun, it is a simple matter of turning on his Famicom and escaping to another life. Sooner or later, though, his past will catch up to him.  
[Original story inspired by Yume Nikki.]*

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# 1 - Peace

I awaken slowly from a deep sleep. It hurts to move, so I sit up slowly. I'm sore. I fell asleep on the floor again, I realize distantly. Not such of a surprise. It's quiet now, so it's probably nighttime. I can't tell for sure- My clock is on the desk facing away from me, and no light ever seeps through the heavy curtains on my window. How long have I been asleep? It doesn't matter. I turn my focus to the small television sitting in front of me. I must have turned my Famicom off before falling asleep. I push the power button on the old console, waiting for it to stutter back to life. A title screen appears- It's my favorite RPG. I guess I'll play this again. I skip the opening credits, heading straight for the menu.

*1 profile found: JUN, level 999, 452 hours. Loading...*

Finally I am where I belong. I am no longer in the dark, cramped room of an 11-year-old boy. Instead, I'm in the beautiful, bright Everal Forest. Green-tinted lights with no apparent source dance around me, making the forest as bright as day, even without the sun peeking through the canopy. It's wet and humid here, and yet perfectly comfortable, like a warm bath-house. I hear soft music playing; no longer the tinny beeps produced by my Famicom, but a full orchestra of atmospheric bliss. I never want to leave. It doesn't matter that I've completed the quest a dozen times over. As long as there's beautiful land like this to explore, this is where I will stay.

Time? Time doesn't matter. Nothing from the "real" world matters here. I'm no longer Jun, the outcast foreign wallflower who never leaves his room. Now I'm a mighty warrior, the greatest in the land, respected by everyone. No one points or laughs at me for my accent and my small stature, or calls me a freaky foreigner. No one whispers in concerned or derisive voices, wondering what's wrong with me. No one fights here- I've long since put a stop to that. So I walk through the forest, completely at peace.

What's this? A fork in the road? I thought I'd been through here before, but this new path looks unfamiliar. The trees look strange, deformed somehow. I am afraid, but only a little. I'm invincible, I tell myself, so I walk fearlessly down the strange new path. Maybe there are treasures here! Maybe I'm the first to find them! Maybe I should go back. There is no light now, and the music has slowed and warped so that it is hardly recognizable. I'm afraid, but I've come so far; I can't stop now! I keep going, heart beating fast.

It becomes gradually brighter. I can see a gap in the trees ahead of me, with a golden light shining through. The trees look normal now, and the music has become beautiful and joyful once more. I step through the trees, into the light. I blink against the blinding brightness, then gaze in wonder at the sight before me. It's a clearing, a huge field filled with all kinds of exotic flora. I even see a cherry blossom tree, just like the ones back home. The *sakura* tree is in full bloom; I think I can even... smell it? I can smell the cherry blossoms, it's unbelievable! And the sky- I can see the sky! It's such a perfectly clear blue, like I've never seen before! I stare up at it in awe.

How long has it been since I've seen the sky, the *real* sky? How many days, or weeks? That doesn't matter; it can't possibly compare to this.

There is a tower in the middle of this beautiful clearing, made of pure, glistening marble. It seems to be standing on its own, all by itself in the otherwise pristine forest. Why is it here? Is there anything in it? Perhaps it's treasure- Some powerful weapons, or piles of gold. I walk around the small tower looking for a way in, but there is no door or other entrance that I can see. The tower is featureless except for a window near the top. It's not too high up, maybe if I step back far enough I can see- Wait! Someone is in the window, looking out!

I know her. She has long black hair, cut bluntly around her round face. Her almond eyes are as black as her hair, but shine brightly in the sunlight. She looks as perfect and innocent as I remember her, back when everything was okay. I never thought I'd see her again. Does she notice me? She isn't looking at me.

"Amiko!" I shout her name as loud as I can. "Amiko, is that you?"

She looks down at me. She isn't smiling. Is she still mad at me? She doesn't say a word, she just stares. She knows, she knows! She blames me, I just know it! Suddenly, the world around me begins to change drastically. The trees and flowers look grotesque in their artificial perfection. The Everial orchestra once again becomes twisted and unrecognizable. The scent of the cherry blossom tree is overwhelming, choking me. This isn't right! I should have control! It's not supposed to be this way; I'm not supposed to *let* it be this way! She's doing this; she must be!

"This is my game, Amiko! Leave me alone!" I cry out. I don't care how much I miss her, and I don't care that she's the only person I've thought about since my parents took me away from my home. I don't care anymore. I only want these memories to go away! "Go away, Amiko! This is *my* life!"

I try to pull out my sword, the top-of-the-line sword I spent days searching for. I don't think about what I'll do with it; I just want it. It's suddenly heavy, too heavy for me to lift. Why? I'm a strong warrior! Not anymore, I realize with horror. My hands are those of a young boy. My armor is gone; I'm back in my t-shirt and shorts. My sword crumbles into dust right before my eyes, along with everything else in my inventory. Everything I had worked so hard for is gone. I'm just Jun.

I look up at Amiko again. She stares at me blankly, without so much as a frown or a glare to hint at her thoughts. Our eyes meet for one agonizing moment, and then she turns her back to me. I can only see her long, straight hair as she disappears into the tower. I start to shout up to her, begging her to come back. I am interrupted by the ground beneath my feet shaking violently, and I fall backwards into the grass. The forest is melting away around me. The music is gone. The tower crumbles, and in its place a tremendous dragon rises, bellowing at me in a storm of familiar voices. It's going to kill me!

*Bang!*

My controller hits the wall. I yelp and scramble back away from my Famicom, heart pounding, eyes wide in terror. I'm back in my room; my dark, cramped room. No light seeps in through the curtains, but I can still hear those voices. It's my parents in the kitchen. They're fighting again. My mother is yelling in her fierce Japanese accent; my father's British timbre sounds very sad. They're arguing about me. I block them out, looking at my TV set instead. My faceless virtual avatar is standing in the Everial Forest, a mere collection of pixels representing trees. The hollow, synthesized music beeps quietly. There is no fork in the road ahead, only a path I know well. I was dreaming again.

I yank the RPG cartridge out of my Famicom, and replace it with a different one. It's my favorite platformer. I skip the credits, losing myself in the game.

This is where I belong. Nothing can reach me here.