

## Gimmie Love

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## Gimmie Love

by [carlyraejepsen](#)

### Summary

Akira makes some ramen for Ryuji as a token of their friendship. As a result, Ryuji begins to revisit his relationship with his mom. It makes sense.

### Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Café Leblanc's already closed when Ryuji gets there. He'd actually made pretty good time, but it was already late when Akira asked him to come over. He didn't tell him the reason why he'd invited him, though. The bastard sure does love his secrets.

The door's locked, so he knocks on the glass gingerly, making the bell on the inside jingle a little. Immediately, he sees Akira run right up to the doorway, opening it in an instant with a loud ring.

"Yo," Ryuji greets, holding a hand out to try and get a low-five or one of those handshake-to-hug transitions that cool guys do on American shows sometimes. His theory is that those kinds of guys do it just because they want a hug from their friends but don't wanna look gay. That's why Ryuji wants to do it, anyways— Akira always gives the greatest hugs, and he hasn't gotten one in a while.

Akira, however, leaves him hanging, instead gesturing inside. "Get in here, dude," he says, and his sleeve is rolled up and covered with flour. He's wearing his little green apron, and *that's* covered in flour, too. When he walks in, he first notices that the café smells freaking *amazing*. It doesn't smell like coffee, though. It's a sort of savory smell like a hot dinner. It's kinda familiar for some reason.

“I hope this isn’t a bad time or anything,” Akira says as he shuts the door behind Ryuji, dusting off his hands on his apron. “I mean, there’s no school tomorrow. Am I interrupting any big plans? What were you up to?”

“Oh, yeah, dude, you’re the effin’ worst. I was on a party yacht with my six girlfriends when you texted me. You’re lucky I’m such a goodass friend,” Ryuji says, making Akira laugh that nice sincere laugh of his as he ducks behind the counter, into the room behind the wall with the big jars of tea leaves and coffee beans. It’s almost uncomfortably warm inside, so Ryuji takes off his puffy purple jacket and lays it over the counter, leaving him in his yellow tank top.

“What were you *really* up to?” Akira asks, his voice muffled.

“I dunno, man.” He hesitates. Might as well be honest with him. “Well, my mom’s either at work or stayin’ at her boyfriend’s house most nights, so I get a ton of alone time. So... y’know.”

“So what?”

“C’mon, man, do you *really* wanna make me admit that I spend off-days beatin’ my meat like it owes me money?” Ryuji responds, trying to keep a straight face. “Christ. You texted me right in the middle of a porno that had a *riveting* plot.”

Akira cracks up again, loud enough that he can hear it from two rooms over, so warm-sounding that it makes Ryuji crack a smile. God, does he love making him laugh like that. It’s the nicest sound in the world. Whenever Ryuji says something stupid enough to make Akira lose his shit, it makes him feel like he’s really accomplished something. Like he’s done something right in this world.

Ryuji might be falling in love with Akira a little bit. He’s trying to be strong by shutting that shit down as fast as he can.

“Well, while meat-beating was my *original* plan for the night,” Akira starts as he appears behind the counter again, holding out two large red bowls with two smaller bowls placed on top as lids, “I decided to show a little appreciation for my best friend by practicing my cooking skills instead.”

“Wow,” Ryuji chuckles like an idiot, feeling his ears start to get hot at the title. And the thought of Akira’s original plan sticks in his mind for a little bit too long. He sits down at a chair in front of the tray. “Who could that be?”

“Morgana,” Akira answers plainly, and *Ryuji’s* the one that loses his shit this time. Akira must’ve locked the little jerk upstairs like he usually does when they hang out at Leblanc. “No, no, seriously. I’m serious. I honestly feel like I don’t do enough for you. I mean, you’re the one who’s always making plans and taking me places and paying for train fare and everything,” he says, giving him a sincere look. His black hair’s even messier than usual, and it looks like he hasn’t washed it in a little while. And his eyes look all dark and shiny when he’s not wearing glasses. Hey, wait a second—

Ryuji suddenly asks, “Where the hell are your glasses?”

And Akira just stares at him for a second. “I... put in contacts?”

“Oh.” Now Ryuji feels straight-up dumb. “I-I was kinda startin’ to think you didn’t need ‘em. Like, you had perfect vision, and you were just wearin’ fake ones with plain glass to look cool.”

Thankfully, Akira doesn’t laugh or call him stupid or anything. He just shakes his head and says, “Nah. I’m blind as a bat without my glasses. Contacts are just more convenient sometimes. I used

to wear them all the time when I was younger.”

“Bats have pretty good eyesight, though,” Ryuji offers, and Akira leans in on his elbows from across the counter like he’s interested and it gets kind of hard to concentrate. “I did a report on bats as a kid one time. I-It’s a common misconception ‘cause of the idiom.”

Akira’s brows raise. “Well, you learn something new every day,” he says, smiling warmly, standing back up to put his hands on the lids of each of the bowls.

“Now, lemme see if haulin’ ass over here was worth leavin’ my sex-cocaine-yacht-party,” Ryuji states, gesturing to the tray.

“Shit, dude, there was *cocaine*? You should’ve told me earlier. Now I feel guilty for dragging you away.”

“Yeah, it was incredible, and I’ll never forgive you for this, but that ain’t the point. Present me with my offering, my good man.”

Akira chuckles. “Just give it a second. I wanna make sure the noodles cook all the way through. I made them from scratch,” he jerks his chin down to the spots of flour on his apron. “I’ve been on my noodle grind since, like, six o’clock. It turned out pretty decent, I think. You’re gonna love it.”

Ryuji groans. “Just *show* me already, ya damn tease. I haven’t eaten dinner yet.” He didn’t have time to stop by the supermarket a block away from his apartment complex where he picks up those pre-packaged sandwiches and stuff whenever he doesn’t have the energy to make himself something.

“Here we go... Da-da-da-da,” chimes Akira, mimicking the Zelda item fanfare. With a grand flourish of his wrists, he pulls back the lids, revealing two bowls of the most delicious-looking ramen Ryuji’s ever seen in his life. The noodles look absolutely perfect, and the broth is all golden brown with only a few spots of oil here and there so it won’t be too greasy, and there are little slices of spring onion arranged in an arc around the side of the bowl, perfectly garnished with bean sprouts, a sheet of dried seaweed sticking halfway out of the broth. A cloud of steam billows out as soon as the lid is gone, and the smell is absolutely *heavenly*—

And Ryuji’s heart hurts a little bit, which doesn’t make sense. And then he starts to think about his mom. Why is he thinking about his *mom*?

“I went to the grocery store this morning and got everything,” Akira starts to explain, setting the lids down. “And Sojiro said I could use the stove in the back once we closed up. I totally did the noodles myself, but the broth is a mix from the store. And I’m sorry there’s no egg or pork, but it’s really easy to go wrong with ingredients you can undercook, so I wanted to play it safe. Didn’t want to give you salmonella or something.” He ducks down a little to reach underneath the counter, setting two big spoons and two sets of chopsticks on the tray. “You said shoyu is your favorite, though, right? So I got the shoyu-flavor one. I remember you complained about how they’re always sold out of shoyu ramen at that place in Ogikubo whenever we go, you know? So—”

Ryuji isn’t listening at all. He’s staring down at the bowl of ramen in front of him and the sight and the scent overtakes him and—

And he’s suddenly eleven years old, and he’s kneeling at the dinner table in their cluttered little apartment three days after his dad stormed out with white garbage bags full of his clothes and belongings slung over his shoulders. He watches the memory play out in front of him like a lucid dream, and he can’t move, and it’s like he isn’t breathing at all.

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“You should learn how to cook sometime, kid,” says Mom as she kneels down across from him, filling his glass with water from the little blue filtered pitcher they always keep out because the tap water here makes you sick. He looks at the tattoos all over her arms, the ones she has to cover up at all costs during job interviews. He looks at the old tattoo of Dad’s name on her neck, the one that she covers with makeup every single morning. The steam from their dinner had made the concealer rub off a little, showing a few blue-black kanji on her skin.

The shoyu-flavor ramen she’d been slaving over since he came home from school today is cooling in front of him, golden brown with spring onion and bamboo shoot, the boiled egg boiling some more in the broth. The noodles are store-bought, but the broth is one of her own recipe.

“There’s nothin’ worse than a man who doesn’t know how to cook,” Mom continues. Mom’s name is Airi Sakamoto. She’s been secretly saving up money to get it legally changed back to her maiden name. Ryuji forgets what her maiden name is. She was eighteen when she got married and had Ryuji. “Men ain’t expected to know how to do *shit* for their families, Juji, and that’s why this world is as fucked up as it is.”

Juji is a nickname that his mom calls him. Others include ‘Ryuj’, ‘Juj’, or ‘kid’. They make Ryuji feel safe.

“Cookin’ is an art. The only reason it ain’t taken seriously is ‘cause women do it, and that’s the goddamn truth. There’s nothin’ else like cookin’, Juj. It’s like puttin’ a little piece of your soul into somethin’ that you know’s gonna be gone in about a half hour. When somebody cooks somethin’ nice for you, they’re givin’ you a slice of their heart. They’re puttin’ in fuckin’ *hours* just so you can have a real good couple of minutes. Remember that.”

“I will,” says Ryuji, nodding a little bit. He can smell the ginger she’d used in the stock.

Mom has long, straight black hair that she wears in a ponytail every day. She used to bleach it when she was younger, and she looks really pretty when she’s blonde in old pictures, but she regrets it a lot because it made her hair feel all unhealthy. She has a nice and kinda gravelly voice because she used to smoke, but she quit once Ryuji started learning about the dangers of tobacco and alcohol at school and started to parrot entire lessons to his parents in hopes that they would change their ways. At least Mom listened.

She’s short and has a nice round face and her eyebrows are plucked all thin, and there’s been a big dark bruise on her right eye since Monday.

“... You sure are quiet today,” Mom chuckles, stirring her ramen, her wrist barely moving. “What’s eatin’ you, huh?”

“Nothin’,” Ryuji mumbles, taking a sip of water. “Sorry. I think I’m just tired.” He isn’t very hungry.

Mom gives him a concerned look. “Tell me. Is it ‘cause you’re nervous about middle school? C’mon, you still got a few more weeks till it starts—”

“I’m fine, Mom,” he forces a smile. “Don’t want you to worry about me.”

She looks a little hurt. “Look, Juji, I’m gonna need you to be honest with me right now. S’already

hard enough tryin' to get some fuckin' certainty in our lives right now, so I need you to be a constant for me. I don't want you to lie to me just to spare my feelings, 'cause guess what? I'm your mom, n' I'm *always* gonna be worrying about you, no matter what. I need you to tell me how you feel. Or else I'll just be guessin' and graspin' at straws, and I won't be able to help you out when you're hurtin'."

Ryuji sighs, dropping the smile. "Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"Where the fuck is Dad?"

"*Language*, Juji," she shoots back immediately, and Ryuji flinches.

"B-but you just *said*—"

She shushes him. "Don't use me as a model for what is and isn't okay, okay? I already fucked up enough," she says, then squints and tries again. "I already effed up enough. There. If you're gonna swear, use *that*. Kids shouldn't swear," she adds. "It ain't right."

"Okay," Ryuji nods, staring down at his ramen. Maybe he can eat a little. Maybe he'll just pick out the sprouts and eat them one by one. He scratches at the bandaid on his cheek—

Then, Mom makes this one distressed noise in the back of her throat, pointing to his cheek.

"What's that?"

"Oh, um—"

"Ryuji, what *happened*?" she asks, oh god, oh god *please* don't get upset—

"I-I just tripped on the blacktop today at school," he says quickly, telling the truth like she told him to, even though it's a little embarrassing. "I was playin' around n' I tripped over my laces."

She huffs out a relieved breath. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I went to the nurse's office n' everything." He peels the bandaid off and crumples it into his pocket, and it doesn't sting that much because the scrape isn't that bad. He doesn't meet her eye. "She said she called you, but you didn't pick up. So I think you were at work when it happened."

Ryuji hates when Mom's eyes get all sad like that. He knows she feels like a bad mother. He wishes he could just tell her over and over that she's doing a really good job, and that it isn't her fault that things are going like this. "You gotta be more careful when you're runnin' around like that, kid. You go too fast for your own good. You get so *reckless* sometimes. It makes me worried. N' now you look kinda rough."

"Well, so do *you*, so now we match," he says, almost trying to cheer her up with a joke like he does, reaching out across the table to try and gently touch her face where it's bruised—

But Mom's strong hand immediately grabs his wrist like she's scared. She slowly lowers it so that his arm lays flat across the table, stroking his fingers, trying to play it off like she just wanted to hold hands.

"What happened?" Ryuji asks even though he already knows.

"... I fell down the stairs," she chuckles, and Ryuji laughs too. It's almost an inside joke at this

point: “fell down the stairs” is secret code for “did something that Dad didn’t like”. It’s what they tell PTA moms and gossiping neighbors about mysterious lumps and bruises so that their family doesn’t look like a disgrace.

But then he starts thinking about Dad, and he doesn’t feel like laughing anymore. Dad was really, *really* mad when he left. Ryuji had locked himself in his room when it happened to try and pretend none of it was happening like he usually does, but the walls are thin, and his headphones are broken. He became a spectator instead, unable to do anything but watch through the hole Dad punched in his door a couple years back as he screams at Mom and packs up random things, some of which aren’t even his. Ryuji swore he saw him pack up one of his action figures off the coffee table. He was probably drunk.

“... Hey, sweetheart,” Mom says, softer this time, still running her fingers over his. She called him ‘sweetheart,’ meaning that something is very wrong. Ryuji picks up his spoon with his free hand and tries to take a sip of the broth. It’s still too hot, so he blows on it and puts it back down. “I gotta talk to you about somethin’.”

“Dad’s not comin’ back, right?”

She looks shocked like she wasn’t expecting him to figure it out. Maybe she thinks he’s as dumb as his teachers do. “Yeah,” she nods.

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

“And that’s... a good thing,” Ryuji says affirmatively, thinking of money spent on liquor instead of paper towels or laundry detergent, of aching marks on his face and his arms that he’d have to explain to teachers, of nights spent cowering in his bed with that iPod he won from a school lotto blaring in his ears until his earbuds crackle and he hears ringing instead of screaming. “... Right?” he asks, a little shaky this time, thinking of when he was in kindergarten and everything in the entire world was good, when him and his dad would sit on the couch and watch cartoons together, or when he would make up funny voices for all the characters in storybooks as he reads them to him.

“Right,” says Mom. “It’s a real good thing.”

Ryuji breathes in deep, trying to calm himself down. Then he breathes out. In, out, in, out, faster and faster until he’s dizzy and short of breath and he can feel himself start to tear up, and he almost feels like he’s about to puke, and he starts crying really, *really* hard—

“Hey, hey, *hey*, it’s okay,” Mom rushes, grabbing his other hand from across the table, “It’s all okay. We just gotta be strong right now. This is where it starts to get better, y’know? This is,” she sniffs, crying because of him, and Ryuji wishes he didn’t exist at all. “This is where it starts going up. We just really have to be strong for each other. You’ve been so strong through everythin’, honey. You’ve been so *good*.”

“I’m sorry,” Ryuji wheezes, and he feels just like that time he fell off a swingset in second grade and landed straight on his back and his lungs didn’t work for a minute or two. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so effin’ *sorry*, Mom, I’m so sorry—”

“What the hell are you sorry for?”

“Cryin’,” he manages, his nose running. “Makin’ you sad. I— I dunno. I’m sorry.”

Mom squeezes his hands harder. “Ryuji,” she breathes, and he wants to look anywhere else. “You just need to be strong. You are the most important thing in my entire life. I will do anything to make sure you’re safe and you’re happy and you’re in the right place. You have never, ever done wrong by me or anyone else in your entire life. You’ve been doin’ your absolute best during the absolute worst, and, a-and I will *never* be able to thank you enough for that.”

“Mom—”

“I’m gonna start workin’ full-time,” she says, and her gravelly voice goes all weak. “I gotta. That’s the only way we can stay here without his salary. If I’m,” she looks down at their dinner, “If I don’t have time to do this kinda stuff for you anymore, and you start havin’ to take care of yourself more, then you need to understand that it ain’t your fault, okay?”

“I should get a job,” he tries, “I should start workin’ somewhere, I, I bet there’s places that I could find, I bet—”

She immediately shushes him again. “Your job is bein’ the best kid you can be. Your job is gettin’ good grades n’ makin’ friends n’ bein’ kind to people. Your job is tellin’ me whenever you feel like somethin’s wrong. All I want from you is honesty and strength. That’s all I need.”

He blinks the tears back down, trying to breathe normal again. He thinks about the 70s and 60s on his report card.

“Okay,” he manages.

“I love you, Juji,” she says, squeezing his hands again before slowly letting go. He quickly picks up his napkin to wipe his eyes and his nose. “Love you like nobody else does. Don’t forget it.”

“I love you too,” he sniffs, crumpling the napkin into his lap. He tries the broth again, and it’s cooled down. It’s the tastiest thing he’s ever had. He picks up his chopsticks and starts at the noodles, which are also really tasty.

There’s a quiet, lovely moment right there as they wordlessly start eating. Like the two of them are still a family no matter what the hell happens. No matter how little or broken or tired they are.

Suddenly, Ryuji remembers why he was running. “Oh, Mom,” he pipes up, his mouth full of noodles. He swallows when she looks up, starting with, “Y’know how the middle school has that track-and-field team?”

“Uh-huh?”

“I signed up at lunch today,” he beams, and he doesn’t feel like crying anymore. “I filled out all the forms. I get to try out for it in March.”

Her expression goes so unbelievably happy for a moment. Ryuji wants to keep it like that forever. “That’s *awesome*, Juji,” she smiles. “I’m so proud of you for doin’ stuff yourself like that.”

“You *are*?” He pauses. “I had to forge your signature a buncha times.”

Mom stares for a second. She starts laughing slow at first, but then it gets faster and louder until the two of them are just laughing over their dinner like nothing’s wrong in the world, like everything’s okay and everything’ll always be okay. As long as they’ve got each other, then it’s more than okay.

—

“Ryuji?” Akira puts his hand on his shoulder, shaking him again and again, “Hey, Ryuji, you okay? Ryuji?”

Ryuji snaps out of a trance, and the memory fades, and he’s staring down at a steaming bowl of ramen and thinking about back when his house felt like home. He’s about to cry. Shit, he’s about to cry.

“Is it bad or something?” Akira asks, and everything hurts so bad that Ryuji just wants to sit in his room and shut all the lights off and lay down by himself. “I-I’m sorry. I thought it turned out alright, but it’s my first time making it, so I don’t know. Well, if you don’t count Maruchan, I guess.”

“No, no, man, it’s,” he rubs his eye like he’s tired, “it’s great. It looks great. Listen, uh, my mom just texted me, so I gotta go home,” he says, and for some reason he gets his phone out of his pocket and his arm jerks up to present Akira with his notification-less lock screen, thus immediately proving that he’s lying. Great. “I’m sorry,” he says, pretending like he didn’t just do that. “I-I’m real sorry, Akira.”

Akira gives him a look that he can’t quite read. He doesn’t look angry, though. Ryuji has to hold his breath to keep from crying. He has to be strong. “... Oh,” Akira breathes. “Well, um... okay. If you want, I could put yours in a tupperware real quick, and you could take it with you.”

Oh, God, Akira’s such a good person. Ryuji’s crushing on him so hard that he wants to hang himself. He should say no because he’s already being selfish enough, but he’s so hungry, and it smells so *good*. He swallows. “Sure,” he says. His voice cracks a little.

Akira gives him a small smile, taking the tray back into the room behind the counter. This is bad. This is so, so bad.

Ryuji stands up on his weak legs and picks his jacket up off the counter, burying his face in it for a moment. He feels sort of hot and sort of like everything’s going fast and like he can’t stop shaking. He’s not breathing too well, either. He keeps making this weird wheezing noise when he inhales. Maybe it’s a panic attack. That’s not good. This isn’t good.

“I’m giving you the other bowl, too,” Akira says from the other room, and Ryuji has to slump against the counter to keep from falling over. “For your mom.”

Ryuji forces out a laugh, throwing his jacket over his shoulder like it’s a white garbage bag. “Hey, c’mon, no, dude, you worked so hard, you, you gotta, just keep some for yourself, alright? C’mon. Don’t give me that much. Bet she already, uh, had dinner, anyways—”

It’s too late. Akira reappears with two clear plastic takeout tubs of ramen on the same tray. “I insist,” he says cheerfully as he snaps on the matching lids, but his expression looks concerned. It’s a familiar look.

“... *Please*, no,” Ryuji says, and he really hopes he can’t see the way his eyes are fogging up. He can’t cry. He needs to be strong. “I c— I can’t even carry two. I’d spill ‘em everywhere.”

Akira simply ducks down beneath the counter again and pulls out a brown paper bag with Leblanc’s logo on it, opening it and gingerly placing the tubs next to each other inside. “There,” he says, and he walks around the counter so that they’re face-to-face when he hands him the bag.



“Just be careful.”

There’s this big awkward pause right there. Ryuji takes the bag out of Akira’s hand like it’s made of glass or something, and he sets it down quiveringly on the floor. Then he throws his arms around Akira because he needs a hug, and it’s definitely less weak to need a hug than it is to cry in front of the guy you like.

“Oh, my *god*,” goes Akira, putting his arms around him just as fast until they’re holding each other tight in the middle of a goddamn closed coffee shop. His hug feels just as good as Ryuji’d remembered. “Oh, god, it’s okay, man. It’s all okay. I’m not mad. Everything’s fine.”

“No, it’s not,” Ryuji whimpers, pressing his face into Akira’s shoulder. Underneath his apron, his shirt somehow still smells like coffee. “I’m bein’ a baby. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Hey, it’s alright,” Akira says, placing his hand on the back of his neck. “I’m... *I’m* sorry. For whatever I did wrong. Is there any way I can fix it?”

“You didn’t do *nothin’* wrong, man,” Ryuji says, and his voice sounds so stupid and tearful that he wishes he could never speak again. “You have never, *ever* done me wrong,” he sniffs, being an idiot. “Or anybody else.”

“Then... what’s...” Akira lets him loose a little bit, but they’re still hugging, and they share this *look*. His eyes are like whirlpools. It makes Ryuji shiver, makes him feel like his fingertips are buzzing and there’s no possible way he could keep still for any longer.

Hesitantly, awkwardly, Ryuji leans in and presses a firm kiss on Akira’s cheek. His skin is warm and impossibly soft. A kiss on the cheek is non-offensive, right? Nothing worth ending a friendship over, right? What a fucking stupid thing to do, though. Ryuji’s such a piece of shit.

After he pulls back, he looks down at the floor, picking up the bag again and saying, “Sorry,” so fast and quiet that he hardly hears it himself, practically dashing back towards the glass door with the bell—

“*Ryuji*,” he shouts as Ryuji pushes the door open, the bell chiming. He looks back, and Akira’s eyes are all red. Must be something wrong with his contacts.

“... Yuh?” His throat is all gross, and the word doesn’t come out sounding right.

Akira swallows and says, “I like you, too,” even though Ryuji hadn’t even said anything. What a perceptive guy. “Th-there’s no school tomorrow, so,” he continues, gesturing back to the stairs to the attic, and Ryuji feels like he’s just turned to stone. “You could spend the night if you want to. Sojiro already went home. I could get Morgana to leave us alone. You could come upstairs and we could,” he stops, staring, still staring with his face all red underneath his black bangs. “We could,” Akira repeats himself, biting his lip nervously for a split second.

Ryuji hears ringing in his ears. His heart jolts so fast that he legitimately fears that he might throw up, and his mouth waters, and he gets that awful tugging feeling at the back of his tongue. He takes a deep breath. “I— um.” He breathes out, and the ringing gets louder. “G’night, Akira,” he warbles.

The last thing he hears as he leaves is the ringing of the bell, booking it down the street through the cold air so that he isn’t tempted to look in through the glass door, holding the bag stable like it’s precious and never stopping to put on his jacket.

He only catches his breath when he makes it to the train station, forcing himself to slow down.

He's in pretty good shape because him and Akira run together so much, but it's been raining lately, so his leg's hurting more than usual, and his spit is all thick and gross in his mouth. He feels a lot calmer when he first boards the train, and it probably means that the panic attack's going away. He's calm, but he still feels really awful. He feels like something's about to jump up from underneath the track and kill him. There's some things you can't run away from.

The train isn't very busy this late, so Ryuji finds a place to sit pretty easily, and the ride gives him time to think everything over and consider what went wrong. The first and most obvious is how he's falling in love with a guy, which has never, ever happened to him before. He's been in love with girls a million times before— even if it never went anywhere, the feelings were still valid— so it doesn't make sense for him to suddenly become gay just because a hot dude is super friendly and understanding towards him. And apparently likes him back. And may or may not have just offered to sleep with him.

Maybe Ryuji's just the kind of person who likes guys and girls at the same time. Okay, that's simple. Boom. One done.

For some reason, though, the realization makes him feel even *worse*. It's good to have it sorted out, but there's the whole issue of the gross way of thinking he used to have. Maybe he still has it a little bit. Maybe that's why he hates himself for it sometimes. And maybe his *mom* thinks that way.

Thinking of his mom leads him to the second thing that'd gone wrong. What the hell happened? Why did a goddamn bowl of noodles make him go all weird and emo like that? Was he just staring into space for a minute while he was thinking about being a kid?

It was probably the first time he'd really thought about his dad for a while. He mostly tries to push all of that stuff down and move on with his life. He thinks that's what his mom must want. Hell, even just mentioning it briefly to Akira when they were first getting acquainted was really tough for him. The stupidass good ramen had brought it all back up to the surface. Fuck. Screw Akira for being such a good cook. Screw him for—

For putting in hours just so that Ryuji could have a good couple of minutes.

But honestly, why the hell would Akira like Ryuji back? Ryuji's a goddamn trainwreck. The only redeeming thing about him is that he looks kinda handsome with the right lighting. And besides, Akira's been on actual dates with girls before, so why would he like a *guy*? It doesn't make any sense—

Oh, maybe Akira's the type of person who likes both, too. Bam.

Ryuji's mind starts to go kind of stupid after that. What if he ran right back to Leblanc in a grand gesture of love like at the end of a chick flick? What if he threw the door open so hard that the glass shattered and ran right upstairs to the attic and drop-kicked Morgana straight out the window and grabbed Akira and dipped him down to kiss him on the mouth? His lips would probably feel even softer than his cheek, wouldn't they? What if they started going on dates together after that, holding hands in public and stuff? Would Akira want to go on dates, or did he only want him for the night? Maybe Akira doesn't like him in the way that Ryuji likes him. Maybe Akira just wanted to use him to see what it was like to do it with a guy and then forget about it after. He'd heard of guy friends doing that. Was Akira that type of guy?

In any case, the latter scenario seems a lot more realistic. Ryuji can't strongly relate to being wanted, but he can *definitely* relate to being used.

Like how Kamoshida used him to win races. Like how Dad used him to stop Mom from running

away.

There's a *ding* over the intercom. It's his stop. Damn, time really flew. Carefully, he picks up the paper bag and shoves his jacket in with the tubs of ramen and leaves the sliding doors into the dimly lit train station. He can feel the warmth of the ramen radiating through the bag when he picks it up from the bottom.

Ryuji's house is about a block and a half away, so it doesn't take long after that. He gets his keys out of his pocket as soon as he's above ground because he likes to run his fingers over the little grooves in the metal. He feels so, *so* tired. He tells himself he's gonna shove the noodles in his face and then go directly to bed, and then he'll let himself cry for a bit, and the thought makes him feel a little less awful. He decides that whatever Akira wants to happen, he'll let it happen. Akira usually knows best, and Ryuji wants to make him happy. Akira's a smart guy. He's their leader. *His* leader.

His leg is still sore by the time he makes it to his complex, climbing the stairs to the door of his apartment. As he unlocks it, he notices yet again that the address number fell off. He keeps forgetting to go to the hardware store and get another one.

He shuts the door behind him when he's inside, kicking off his sneakers and throwing his keys in the glass dish on the little side table by the doormat. For some reason, the kitchen lights are on. Maybe he'd forgotten to turn them off before he left.

Ryuji lets out a long breath, setting the bag down on the cluttered living room table. They always just leave that little table there, too lazy to do anything else with the space.

"Heya, kid," says a voice in the kitchen, and Ryuji nearly jumps out of his skin. Mom's rummaging through the fridge.

"*Jesus*," Ryuji clutches his chest, laughing nervously when his mom turns around to look at him. "You just gave me a friggin' heart attack."

She starts laughing too, and her voice sounds strained and tired. She's still in her grocery store uniform, the blue-striped shirt with the little pockets and the long pencil skirt. "What's a guy like you doin' on a night like this?"

"Oh, uh. I was over at my friend Akira's place," he points back to the door, shuffling into the light of the kitchen from the dark of the rest of the house. "Only for a lil' bit."

"Akira again?" she muses, taking a few random condiments and vegetables and setting them on the floor as she ducks back into the fridge. They must've gone rancid. "You've told me about this guy before. How long've you been friends? Couple months?"

"Almost a year now," he says, scratching his neck. "Wh— um, what are you doin' home so early?" The fact that she isn't at Koji's is also a little weird because that's where she always stays when she has late shifts at that grocery store. He decides not to pester her with questions about it. She just looks so tired.

She snickers again, which is nice. "Early? Juj, s'almost eleven."

"Well, I, I just—"

"Aw, I know what you mean." She closes the fridge for a second, picking her findings off the linoleum tile and throwing them away. "The new manager has no idea what the hell he's doin', so my hours are all switched up. I just got home." She washes her hands in the dish-filled sink, giving

him an exhausted smile. “It makes me really happy to know you’ve been hangin’ out with friends again.”

Ryuji starts to feel sick again. “Yeah,” he says softly. A part of him feels like he should tell her. Then again, why the hell should he tell her? Why would he risk so much just for honesty’s sake?

“I was just about to heat up some old Chinese takeout. Did you eat?”

He looks down at the bag on the table. “... Y-yeah, I did,” he swallows thickly. It doesn’t matter. It’s not like it’ll be the first time he’s gone to bed without dinner. “Akira actually made us some fresh ramen from scratch, n’ there’s a ton left over in the bag on the table. It’s good as eff. Have some. Have all of it, if you want.”

Mom looks impressed, drying her hands on her uniform and unclipping her nametag. A year or so ago, she’d gotten her name changed back to Airi Mamiya. Ryuji wishes they had enough money for him to change *his* name to Mamiya, too. “Maybe I will,” she chuckles to herself. “Teenage boys out here makin’ each other homemade ramen. What a time to be alive.”

She walks up slowly to him, stretching her back out a little before reaching up to pinch his cheek for a moment. He’s outgrown her by at least two dozen centimeters. “From what you’ve told me, this Akira sounds like one helluva guy,” she says, patting his shoulder affectionately as she walks past him. “Tell him I said thanks. I’ve had the longest day today. You wouldn’t goddamn believe it.”

He’s left facing the hallway, staring at his bedroom door with the hole punched in it. She flicks the living room light on. Ryuji’s eyes start welling up again. “Yo, Mom?” he calls into the doorway, starting to drum his hands against his thigh. His chest feels all tight like earlier.

“Yeah, Juji?” He hears the bag crumple open as she takes out one of the plastic containers. He should’ve gotten his jacket out.

“I, uh,” he turns around slowly, still looking at the floor, at his green socks with the little fishbone designs on them. “You know how I keep talkin’ about my friend Akira?”

She snorts because he was literally just talking about Akira like two seconds ago, and Ryuji looks up for a second, finding nothing but her warm expression. He sees the bags under her eyes and the gray hairs that lead into her straight black ponytail and the black-blue kanji half-covered on her neck. “I sure do.”

He looks back down, already embarrassed. His pulse pounds in his ears until he can hardly hear his own voice. “Well, I...”

It isn’t too late to bail. He could totally just run right back to his room. He could forget about this entire night and just have things go back to normal between him and Akira and Mom and everything else on earth.

“I think I love him,” his voice says on its own, and he stares at this one stain on the tile, focusing on every detail of it. His eyes itch. “So I think... that makes me a both... something... or a bi-something... I don’t, um,” his voice breaks, and he sucks in a shuddering breath before he looks up and sees her with wide shocked eyes, having stopped in the middle of opening one of the containers. It all goes very quiet.

Ryuji immediately turns his back to her and goes into full-on panic mode, backtracking and scratching at the back of his hand so hard that he’s almost afraid he’ll draw blood. “I dunno why I

said that,” he blurts out, “Y-you got so much on your plate already so it’s really selfish of me to just dump stupid stuff on you like that, you had a really long day, please forget I said that, I’m really sorry, you can forget I said any of that— I’m so sorry, that was so, *so* stupid,” he rushes until his words join together and his mouth tastes like salt, trying to force himself towards his room—

But then he feels his mom throw her strong arms around him from behind, holding him closer than she has in what feels like forever. She isn’t a very affectionate person. His breath immediately catches, and he feels his face go all hot, and he wheezes a little bit more.

“Why— why aren’t you breathing?” Mom asks, and she sounds like she’s scared.

Ryuji clenches his eyes shut. He feels so ashamed of himself. “Don’t wanna cry,” he answers. “Wanna be strong like you tell me to.”

“When’d I *ever* say that crying wasn’t strong?” she says it all strained, and his eyes fly open as she turns him around in her arms, laying a firm hand on his shoulder by his neck. Her other hand meets his chin when he tries to look down at the floor again.

“Mom, I—”

Mom just goes, “Hey, look at me, look at me,” lifting his head so that he sees her. Her mascara’s running. “Ryuji, you are... *so* good to the people you love. You care so deeply about them, and you protect them, and you try so goddamn hard to keep them happy, and, and you apologize too much to them,” she chuckles, and he does too, dizzy as he starts to feel his hot tears roll down his cheeks. “So I want you to do somethin’ for me, okay?”

“What?”

“Want you to love whoever you want,” she whispers, “If it’s a he or she or whatever-the-shit— I want you to love the *hell* out of ‘em,” she smiles so wide that her eyes gleam, “‘Cause you’d never hurt anybody you love. You’re only gonna do ‘em good.”

And then she hugs him, and Ryuji cries harder than he has in ages, resting his chin on the top of her head and clinging to her like he’s wanted to for years. He feels happy and he feels sad and he feels embarrassed for being so nervous and saying sorry so much. He feels relieved and exhausted and incredibly lucky to have gotten two really good hugs from two of his favorite people in the same day.

It goes on for longer than it should, the two of them crying and hugging in their messy living room. He doesn’t even mind if her makeup gets on his shirt. Soon enough, Ryuji’s the only one crying, and his mom is just comforting him. Then he hears his stomach grumbling.

“I... I didn’t eat,” he sniffs after a little while, wiping his face on his forearm before he can get tears and snot all over the place. “M’ sorry I said I did. I was just super bummed out n’ I didn’t wanna bother you by hoggin’ the table.”

She kisses her teeth, reaching up to give him a gentle bonk on the head with her knuckle like she does sometimes. It makes him laugh. “Gah. Don’t lie to me, my Juji. You’re already skinny enough as it is.” Her tone switches. “You can’t serve as the man of the house if you’re a skeleton,” she jokes, immediately bringing her hand back down to poke at his ribcage. “So *pointy*. Been readin’ too many pirate comics, eh? Tryina become a skull n’ crossbones?”

“That isn’t physically *possible*,” he laughs again, rubbing his eyes some more before he puffs out his chest. “I’m puttin’ on muscle, anyway. I’m gonna get swole, just you wait,” he brags, flexing

an arm for her to feel. “Anybody who tries us is gonna wish they were never born.”

“Ooh, Akira’s gonna like that, huh?”

“Sh-*shaddup*, Mom,” Ryuji snickers into his hand, deflating and blushing hard, running out of her grip and off to the kitchen as his mom laughs behind him.

They help each other in clearing off the table, putting old magazines and letters and bills and flyers and coins and cords in neat piles by the side of the wall. They set the table with bowls and chopsticks and thick plastic spoons and clean glasses and that blue pitcher of water with the filter. Akira’s ramen is still steaming when they open the containers to pour them into their bowls, but it’s the perfect temperature to eat. It’s delicious, all hot and savory and light. The noodles are probably the best part.

They talk about a lot of things over dinner. Mom talks about how her and Koji broke up a couple days ago and how she doesn’t even care because Koji was always a jerk and she’s surprised she didn’t end it sooner. She says this about all the men she dates. Then she talks about how she thinks she’ll probably get a promotion at the restaurant she works at on weekends, and Ryuji’s so proud of her that he makes them clink their water glasses together.

When he gets a turn, Ryuji talks about how he’d gotten all sad and weird with Akira earlier. Then he talks about Akira some more. Then he gets off-topic and talks about Ann for a while, about that one time they got crepes together and how he felt like he’d won at life or something. Of course, he’ll never be able to tell her exactly *how* he’d come into this great new friend group, but he’s happy to tell her stories and put her mind at ease. Things are going up. Things are better.

At some point, though, Mom gets all quiet again. She sighs and apologetically says, “Hey, kid, I know I work a lot. I know I ain’t home too much. I know I can’t buy you a lot of the things you want. I know I should talk to you more, and... and I know I ain’t the best mom, but—”

“You *are*, though,” Ryuji cuts her off with a mouthful of noodles, and he means it. “You’re the best mom. For real.”

She looks at him, and her smile comes back. She lifts up her glass to clink against his again. It’s almost like they’re celebrating.

And for good reason, too— it’s the first time they’ve eaten a meal together like this in five years.

—

Ryuji rolls up to Leblanc about a half hour before it opens the next day. It’s basically the asscrack of dawn. The only people on the train are people with really, *really* shitty jobs.

The sun’s only just starting to rise over the tops of the city skyline, and it’s so cold that Ryuji can see his breath puff out in front of him. His hands are curled up in the pockets of his purple jacket. He’d set his alarm for this and everything. He hates getting up early, but for some reason, he feels more energized than ever. The success of last night’s chat with Mom gave him the burst of confidence and reassurance that he had so desperately needed.

When he makes it to the glass door, he peers in for a second. The lights are all on. He sees Sojiro mopping in the back for a moment before he turns a corner and disappears.

Taking a determined breath, Ryuji knocks on the door.

Akira shows up out of fucking nowhere in his freshly laundered green apron and his glasses, slowly

squinting out through the glass and opening the door with a jingle. “Uh... g’morning?” he says drowsily. His hair is all wet like he’d just showered. “Ryuji, what’re you d—”

Ryuji puts his hands on the sides of Akira’s face and gives him the fastest kiss in the world, so precise and so slight that all he can register is *soft*. “Are you workin’ today?” he asks after, gesturing down to his apron, shoving his hands back in his pockets.

“... Huh?” Akira’s eyes are comically wide, his mouth hanging open a little. “W— no, I’m just, I’m helping Sojiro open up. Did you just—”

“How about we go do a date, then?” He goes up on the balls of his feet. “Like, go out, y’know? Do somethin’ that couples do. See a movie, get lunch. It’s mornin’, so maybe breakfast? I know this place with the most *bitchin’* pancakes, but we can do whatever you want, man. I’m free all day.”

Akira sticks a finger under his glasses to rub his eye. “Are you... asking me *out*?”

“Yeah, if that’s okay.”

And Akira laughs out loud. Warm, coffee-scented air wafts out through the doorway. “Holy fuck, dude,” Akira pushes his wet bangs out of his eyes. “Holy fuuuuck. I’m,” he yawns and stretches, and his breath smells like peppermint, “I’m totally half-asleep right now. Did I— did you just kiss me for a second there, or did I hallucinate that?”

“No, no, that was real,” Ryuji chuckles. “Real as it gets.”

“Wow,” says Akira like he’s in awe. “God *damn*, Ryuji. You really came out swingin’ right there.”

“I know, right?” He pulls out his hand to clench it in front of him. “I am fired the hell *up* right now — I’m super sorry for ditchin’ last night, though. I think I had a panic attack or somethin’, but now I’m all good.” He makes sure to only say sorry once. Once is enough. “I’m *better* than good, to be honest. And I really, really wanna go on a date with you.”

Akira still looks like he can’t believe anything that’s happening. “Glad to hear it,” he breathes a laugh, opening the door a little wider. “You can go ahead and wait upstairs for a hot second. Sojiro’s gonna take over as soon as we’re open.” With his free hand, he points at Ryuji’s chest. “Then I’m gonna take your ass out to breakfast.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he grins, stepping in and wiping off his shoes. “Oh, before I forget— your ramen was effin’ *godly*. My mom told me to thank you for it.”

“Tell your mom I said she’s beautiful,” he simply replies, the bell chiming behind them as the door closes.

## End Notes

uhhh i just wanted to write ryuji's mom in a way that explains his mannerisms/speech patterns! i love the idea of a tough mom being proud and supportive of her bi son. i also love the idea of ryuji and akira dicking around like Idiot Teens. thank u & goodnight

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