

We'll Be Okay.

A Collection of Short Stories

Nick Yidiaris

Acknowledgement

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My friends are a close second. I have the world's greatest friends, none of whom I'll name for fear of leaving someone out, and they make me feel comfortable expressing myself creatively. I could survive without a lot of the luxuries I have in my life, but I couldn't get through without my friends.

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And finally an acknowledgement for my wonderful editor and friend Marci O'Connor, who puts up with a lot of bad jokes and makes sure my writing doesn't drift into meaningless cliché.

I hope this wasn't too long or boring, the real stories and stuff are coming really soon. Thanks, everyone.

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New Beginnings

The Silence

Karen and her daughter Emma have not spoken to one another in eight years, six months, thirteen days, eight hours, forty-three minutes, and fifty-eight seconds. Neither woman can swallow her pride and admit that this whole thing is silly, admit that they are acting like children. Instead, they go about all interaction with one another in total silence, which is made especially difficult by their living situation. Ever since her husband passed away twelve years ago, Karen has lived in the in-law apartment of Emma's house.

The mornings are particularly difficult; both Karen and Emma keep similar schedules and they have a tendency to hold one another up. However, after a point, they part ways with Emma heading off to work and Karen free to spend her retirement as she sees fit. Emma heads outside and Karen stays home, rather than facing the world.

The world outside of the house is deafening to Karen, especially. Because she rarely has cause to leave home, she often feels overwhelmed by the cacophony of voices. Most often, Karen prefers to stay at home making watercolor recreations of old TV Guide covers. She finds the silence comforting.

Emma does not share her mother's worldview; as soon as she steps out the door for work in the morning, she feels rejuvenated. Being in that house, silent and echoing, drives her insane. She also fully believes that her mother's stubbornness and resistance to change is to blame for their current situation.

In reality, they share the blame. They had last spoken on Wednesday, March 14, 2012. On that day, they attended a matinee showing of *A Thousand Words*, starring Eddie Murphy as a man who only has a thou-

sand words left to say before he dies. In the hours following their viewing, Karen was silent, sitting in her chair staring pensively at a TV Guide cover featuring the cast of Friends. Emma attempted to engage her mother in conversation, only to be repeatedly shushed. Finally, exasperated, Emma demanded answers. Karen explained that A Thousand Words, the Eddie Murphy documentary they had walked out on earlier in the day, made her realize that she must have said nearly a thousand words already in her life and that she must not have many words left. She resolved to no longer speak in order to prolong both her own life and indirectly her daughter's life.

Emma tried to explain the truth to her mother several times, but she was constantly shot down. After a time, she stopped trying. What began as an attempt to wait out her mother's vow of silence quickly became a bitter, resentful silence. If Karen was not going to speak to Emma, Emma most certainly was not going to speak to Karen.

And so, eight years, six months, thirteen days, eight hours, forty-three minutes, and fifty-eight seconds since they last spoke, Emma decides that she is done with silence. She attempts to talk to her mother, at first mumbling a simple greeting when she walks in the door from work. She tries to offer her a drink of water, and Karen shushes her. Emma knows now that this is it: her mother is never going to speak to her again. If after all these years she couldn't get through to her, she was going to believe that A Thousand Words was a documentary until the day she died.

Karen knows the same truth, that they will never speak again. But she also knows another truth: A Thousand Words is not a documentary. She never believed that. She just prefers it this way. She finds the silence comforting.

Number One

Harry worked at the second most prestigious law firm in Chicago for six years. He felt that he was long overdue for a promotion, but he was very comfortable; he made very good money, he liked the people he worked with, and the location was very convenient for him. But still, something was eating at him. He wanted that promotion, and come on, it was only the second best law firm in the city. He could do better.

Harry checked the classifieds on a Tuesday and saw that the number one—number one!—law firm in town was hiring. He sent in his resume that same day and got a call back the very next day. He didn't listen to the woman on the phone telling him that he seemed grossly overqualified, all he heard was, "if you're sure you want the job, it's yours."

Harry walked into his old job and quit in dramatic fashion. He told all of his coworkers, who he honestly liked quite a lot, to go fuck themselves. He threw an uncooked pound of haddock on his boss' desk. He stole the #1 Grandmother coffee mug off of Cheryl's desk.

When Harry arrived for his first day of work at the number one law firm in all of Chicago, things were a bit different than he had imagined. He was handed a sandwich board advertising the law firm, boasting great rates on personal injury settlements. His boss, Trevor, was an older guy who did not appear to have a law degree, or all of his teeth. Harry wore the sandwich board eight hours a day for three years, making eleven dollars an hour to shout at people about whiplash.

Harry felt that he was really long overdue for a promotion.

The Ball Pit

In the fall of 1992, a Chuck E. Cheese's franchise was built in Cedar Falls, Iowa. By January of 1993, four separate incidents involving disappearing children had occurred at this location and there were no leads for police to follow. The parents were distraught, but none of them had seen anything suspicious. They all said the same thing: their kids went into the ball pit and never came back out. Police and restaurant management cleared out the ball pit, in an effort to uncover some sort of explanation, but beneath the ball pit was an old gym mat, and beneath the gym mat, the gray concrete floor.

Tommy was seven years old when he disappeared, and he didn't know how to feel about it. As he swam in the depths of the ball pit, he felt drawn to the bottom. He dove down and fell through a wormhole that transported him to a place that he had always imagined might exist. There were flowing rivers of root beer, as the waves crashed, the foam that formed was vanilla ice cream. There were arcade games lining the street and a trampoline that bounced him higher than he had previously thought possible. There were TV sets several stories tall that played all of his favorite movies and TV shows. And then there was a door. Tommy opened the door once, the day he arrived, and peered through it. He saw back into the Chuck-E-Cheese's; the animatronic band playing horrid music, kids running and screaming, old people looking miserable. He could smell the plasticky pizza that he associated so closely with the restaurant. He shut the door and didn't give it a second thought. He talked to the other kids that had disappeared into the ball pit. They were all happy. It felt a little strange at first, but Tommy got used to it pretty quickly. This world provided for them in whatever way they wanted, it seemed to operate as an extension of their imaginations.

The four children lived together in relative harmony for over 30 years.

By that point, they were adults, but their imaginations hadn't grown very much. Without the inspiration of the outside world, their once imaginative, bubbling world felt dull and familiar. Tommy missed the world that he once knew.

When the others had gone to bed for the night, Tommy made his way to the door. He took a deep breath and prepared himself for that old, plasticky pizza smell. He swung the door open, and there was no smell. There was no animatronic band, no kids running and screaming. Just a pile of rubble where a building used to be. Tommy stepped through the doorway and into the shattered corpse of the Chuck-E-Cheese's. He shut the door behind him and examined his surroundings. He could see some familiar landmarks; the city hadn't changed all that much. He turned around and the door was gone, the only way back to his world of imagination closed for good.

He was okay with it. It was time to move on.

The Ball Pit, Part II

In the fall of 1992, a Chuck E. Cheese's franchise was built in Cedar Falls, Iowa. By January of 1993, four separate incidents involving disappearing children had occurred at this Chuck-E-Cheese's and there were no leads for police to follow. The parents were distraught, but none of them had seen anything suspicious. They all said the same thing: their kids went into the ball pit and never came back out. Police and restaurant management cleared out the ball pit, in an effort to uncover some sort of explanation, but beneath the ball pit was an old gym mat, and beneath the gym mat, the gray concrete floor.

When Tommy went missing, he was only seven years old. His parents, Joe and Martha, couldn't bear the grief. Joe worked construction, Martha was a paralegal, they tried their best to provide a good upbringing for their son. They had been at the Chuck-E-Cheese's for the birthday party of Tommy's friend Greg, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. When the police arrived, their search was thorough, but it turned up no information. This being the fourth such incident in such a short period of time, the police determined that they should close the establishment down on a temporary basis while they looked into the case.

But, as is often the case, temporary turned into permanent, and that Chuck-E-Cheese's never opened its doors again. Six years later, the time came for the building to be demolished. When Joe arrived at his work site for the day, his heart sank. He got back into his truck and drove away. He didn't go home. He left Iowa altogether. He didn't stop driving until he was sure he had gotten away. When he finally got out of the car, he was in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

He got a job at a fast food restaurant and drank himself to sleep most nights. He had a truck and a few sets of clothes and a carton of ciga-

rettes. That was home. At the very least, he wasn't in Cedar Falls.

On the night that Joe left, Martha came home late and was surprised to find the house empty. Surprised, sure, but not upset. She and her husband hadn't seen eye to eye in years, really since Tommy had gone missing. Things had fallen apart. She was sleeping with her old college boyfriend, not even bothering to come home some nights, and trying to find some semblance of happiness. She didn't blame Joe, but she didn't love him anymore. She did blame herself, but she tried to ignore that.

Once Joe left, Martha had one less reminder of Tommy. She preferred it that way. She just couldn't bear to remember.

Grand Opening

The grand opening of Justin's car dealership did not go as planned. Something went wrong with the mechanism designed to tether the giant inflatable gorilla to the ground, and it flew away. This might not have been a big deal, but the gorilla ended up landing on the windshield of the very first Subaru that Justin managed to sell. The driver panicked and plowed his new car into a telephone pole, which fell over and crushed several other fine new Subaru vehicles. Justin really regretted that he forgot to purchase insurance for his dealership.

Sunrise

I watched the sun come up through the window in the bathroom of my apartment last Saturday morning. It was less beautiful than I had expected; you know, a lifetime of being told about how amazing sunrises and sunsets are? It's not that I hadn't seen one before, but maybe that I hadn't really paid attention. I just wanted to see something beautiful for once. I tried again at sunset, but the result was the same. Maybe I was doing it wrong. Is there a right way to watch the sunrise or sunset?

It will be alright, though. I'll look for beauty somewhere else. Sometimes I think it might be more beautiful to watch the traffic go by than a sunset. There's something reassuring about seeing so many people go about their lives. Sunrise and sunset feel like a beginning and an ending, but the traffic never really stops. Sure, it'll slow down here and there, but if you wait a few minutes, a car will go by. It doesn't matter what time it is, someone has to be somewhere. I've got to be somewhere, eventually.

The Great Pillow Fort

Construction on the Great Pillow Fort completed in August of 2021. After nearly ten years of steady work, the Martinez brothers had perfected their design and implemented it flawlessly. During the process, the boys grew into men and the fort grew into something more than a pile of pillows: a really big pile of pillows. With several rooms constructed carefully from a variety of different pillows, this pillow fort was truly something to behold.

Then dad walked in, tripped over the dog, and destroyed the Great Pillow Fort. Ten years of work, gone in mere seconds. The Martinez brothers, unfazed by the setback, began the rebuilding process. Perhaps, in time, the pillow fort could fill the void in their lives left by their mother a decade earlier. But probably not.

Academia

College courses rarely deliver on their promises. I mean, the names always sound so exciting. Ancient History failed to even make mention of that time that Shawn stole Kevin's girlfriend. Water under the bridge. And Classics didn't cover Star Wars. Fucking Star Wars. What's more classic than Star Wars? Some Greek shit? Sure.

At least Food Science can't possibly disappoint.

Singing

When I was seven years old, I told my parents I was going to be a rock star when I grew up. I believed it, too. I'd sing along to any old song on the radio and I imagined the fame and the fortune and the singing. I really just loved the singing. When I got older I realized I wasn't going to get the hang of an instrument. I still loved to sing, but I think I'd only been told once in my life that I had a nice singing voice, and the rest of the time I just got glared at for singing so damned much. And as I grew, lots of things became clear, and most of them weren't about singing.

My parents created an impossible standard for my own life. They were happy, and I mean really happy. They loved each other in a way that always seemed so natural to me. You grow up and you learn that things aren't that simple and it makes you wonder how they had managed it. They could be high school sweethearts who started a family and never looked back, but it wasn't going to happen that way for everyone. I didn't understand that until I was a bit older. Adult relationships are hard work.

So I'll probably never be a rock star, I'm starting to think. And maybe I'll never be quite so happy as my parents always seemed to be. But I can still sing.

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Love

Days

Saturday night alone leaves him feeling, well, alone. Staring at the ceiling, wishing he had super powers or friends or a genie to give him super powers or friends, he feels that void growing.

Sunday morning alone almost made him feel better, the void is awfully comfortable, and so he doesn't get out of it until well after noon. He eats cookies for breakfast and thinks about her. She liked cookies. Everyone likes cookies.

Sunday night alone is the saddest of all. He thinks about the past and feels regret. He thinks about the future, and well, shit, somehow that's worse. He thinks about the present and he crumbles entirely. He cries himself to sleep.

When he wakes up on Monday morning, all he can think about is that Barenaked Ladies song, "One Week." It's been two days, she hasn't come back, she isn't coming back. Maybe tomorrow he'll meet someone new and then next week he can think about how he fucked that up too. Maybe not. Instead, he'll just go to class, stare at the professor, never hearing a single word about organic chemistry, and eat a bunch of shitty grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner.

On Tuesday morning, a car runs him over while he's crossing the street. Technically, he was jaywalking, but it's hard to make the car seem sympathetic in a car-on-human collision. The woman who hit him gets out of her car and looks down at him. She can tell that his leg is either broken or he has always had a backwards leg.

Tuesday night, she visits him in the hospital. They actually get along, apart from the underlying resentment that he has, probably because she

hit him with her car. But she's really quite funny, effortlessly charming. She's pretty, too, he noticed that right away. She's not the best driver, but she's pretty. She apologizes once more on her way out of his hospital room. She says she will come back tomorrow.

He believes her.

Microfracture

Sarah and I have been dating for a few years now. It's been pretty serious but we've had our fair share of ups and downs. But for the last few months, there's been a lingering resentment between us that I can't seem to break through. She glares at me a lot of the time, I find myself staring at the floor when she talks. I still love her, but the tension and unease that we've been feeling lately can't be healthy. I need to do something.

About 5 years ago I had microfracture surgery on my shoulder. The way the doctor explained it to me is that they drill small holes into your bone to trick the body into thinking the bone is broken, promoting healing. After a fairly arduous rehab process, my shoulder was just about as good as new.

So in the past few days, I've been picking little fights with Sarah. I let her win, we make up, and it promotes healing. In the long term, I figured this might fix the problems between us. It might make us good as new. But yesterday she left. It was a result of how much fighting we'd been doing lately, she said. I don't know if the little fights I had been picking caused our breakup or if they were simply the straw that broke the camel's back with regards to the aforementioned lingering resentment, but I know it feels like shit.

Lost Love

Sarah lived alone for nearly ten years before she finally met Brett. She found him charming, caring, and funny—his sense of humor is what really drew her to him. The two dated for several months before finally deciding to get an apartment together. But Sarah knew that moving in with Brett meant moving on from her home, and from her past. She had never told Brett about the man she loved before him, and she had tried to put it off for as long as she could, but with the move just days away, she was left with no choice.

While Brett was helping Sarah pack up her things, she mentioned that there were a few things that they should get out of the attic. Brett pulled a chord hanging from Sarah's hallway ceiling and watched the attic stairs unfold in front of him. He had never noticed it before. The two of them ascended the stairs and stepped up into the attic. Brett gasped, and Sarah burst into tears.

The attic was filled, wall to wall, with vinyl copies of Eddie Murphy's "Party All The Time." Years ago, Sarah had heard the song whilst partying and became convinced that she was Eddie Murphy's girl. Shortly thereafter, the song disappeared from the airwaves, for reasons Sarah could never piece together. She built a shrine in tribute to her lost love and hid it from sight in her attic.

Brett was having second thoughts.

Burning

Kevin burned everything that reminded him of Janet. The pictures of the two of them ballroom dancing? Burned. The dress she left in his closet? Burned. His closet? Burned. His apartment? Burned.

When the police arrived, Kevin was halfway through undressing and burning the clothes off his back. They loaded him into the back of the car while the firefighters arrived on scene.

The prison cell reminded Kevin of Janet, but it wouldn't burn.

Inside

We don't have to leave the house today. It's encouraged, sure, but we don't have to. Let's lay on a couch and watch seasons 3-7 of *The Simpsons* front to back and eat leftover Chinese food. I'd rather waste twenty-four hours of my life with you than spend twenty-four seconds talking to anyone else. Sometimes it's better when our biggest problem is how devastated we are about Krusty's relationship with his father; we'll get through that together.

Reflections

Jay's ex-wife had been his muse, and once she was gone, he spent his free time sketching portraits, recreating her in the pages of his sketchpad. He remembered every line of her face, every shade of red in her hair, the way her green eyes contrasted with her olive skin. He did everything he could to bring her back to him, but he only ever got as close as a picture to place by his bed.

Her name was Sarah, well, her name is Sarah, but she's not with him anymore. It seemed to Jay as if their marriage had fallen apart in an instant, but Sarah had been unhappy for a long time. He spent too much time working, drawing this or that for whoever needed it, she felt like he couldn't even see her. A few weeks before she left, Sarah woke up in the middle of the night, unsettled. She made her way to Jay's studio and flipped through his sketchbook. There were dozens of portraits of her, but something felt off.

She stared for a while, trying to figure out what was missing. The longer she looked, the clearer it became. Sure, he had all the lines right. The colors were spot on. But the picture lacked character, it provided no reflection of Sarah, and that hurt. She was more than green eyes and red hair and a perfect nose, she was a person with more than two dimensions. That was the moment when she was sure it was over. She flipped to the last portrait in the sketch book and grabbed a pencil and made her own alterations, and went back to bed.

The day that she left, Sarah left Jay a note on the fridge. It was cliched, she knew, but he'd have to eat at some point, so she was sure he'd see it. She put an enormous amount of detail into the note, detail in equal measure to the detail in Jay's portraits. She had always had a bit of a talent for writing, not that Jay had ever noticed, but when she put all of her

feelings into words, she felt that she had put her truest self on the page.

Jay came home from a meeting with a client to discover the note. He skimmed it. The details didn't seem important to him, he got the gist. She was leaving. He didn't see her for who she really was. He was distracted. She was lonely. Goddamnit.

Six weeks after Sarah had left, Jay was working all night on some sketches for a client. In need of a break, he flipped through his old sketches. He saw one rendering after another of his ex, each more practiced than the one that came before. When he finally reached the last page, he was furious. His portrait had been ruined. Someone—no, Sarah—had drawn tears onto her face, etched in pencil, standing out against the full-color backdrop he had created. But as he stared, his anger melted into understanding. He finally was able to comprehend why his wife had left.

For the next three nights, Jay worked tirelessly on a new portrait of Sarah. It portrayed a full range of emotion, a layer of depth that he had never considered including before. And when he was done and it was perfect, he felt he had brought her back to him. He had never felt more alone.

Love Letters

Max wrote love letters to no one in particular whenever he was feeling lonely, which was most always. He wrote them by hand, believe it or not, because he felt it lent a more personal touch. He would drop these letters in the mailbox addressed only to “you.”

Max was 34 and lonely, and his mail carrier, Steven, was 56, and also lonely. Steven read each and every one of these letters; they were addressed to him, after all. They made him feel a little better about the way things were going.

A Song

I wrote you a song. I can't play an instrument and I can't carry a tune,
but I wrote you a song. I forgot all the words, but that doesn't change the
fact that I wrote you a song.

No, I didn't forget our anniversary, I wrote you a song.

The Mattress

It had been three days since Mark dumped Sam, and she was still sleeping on the couch, although “sleeping” was probably the wrong word for the intermittent spells in which her eyes closed. She had trouble even stepping into her bedroom; it used to be their bedroom, and that was complicated for her. When she did finally manage to walk in there, her eyes went straight for the bed. She tore off the blankets and sheets and threw them on the floor. And then it was just the mattress, the place they used to lay together and share everything with one another.

It had to go. Every second she spent staring at it, she thought of him. She grabbed at it and tried to figure out what to do with it. Now that she thought about it, it even kind of looked like him; it was tall, white, and sort of lumpy. His side was ever so slightly more sunken in, and she could just picture his naked form making that impression, and she felt sick. It was all she could do to keep from hurling all over the mattress and adding to the already countless number of stains on it.

She pulled herself together and got to work. She slid the mattress to the side, but failed to dislodge it from the box spring and dragged the metal bed frame across floor, gouging the hardwood in the process; another scar to remind Sam of the things she would rather forget. She tried once more, this time slipping her fingers under the edge of the mattress and tipping it up, successfully freeing it. Sam shoved the underside of the mattress and it tipped over and leaned against the wall, knocking over a lamp. The lamp was shaped like a leg, like the one from A Christmas Story, it was Mark's. It didn't break. She wished it had broken.

She tipped the mattress up on its end and gave it a shove. It barely budged; she was only a very small woman and it was quite a large mattress. She was going to need help. She took out her phone and scrolled

through the names and landed on Tom, an old friend who had always been pretty helpful to her. He picked up almost immediately and Sam put her request as gently as possible, "Tom, do you think maybe you could swing by and give me a hand getting rid of this old mattress, I could really use the help."

The length of the pause that Tom took was not comforting to Sam, and when he finally spoke, things only got worse, "sorry, but no." Sam just hung up on him. She wasn't interested in hearing his explanation, although she had to wonder. He'd never said no to her before, at least that she could remember. She couldn't afford to lose anyone else.

Sam sighed, she felt as though she was being ignored. It was a familiar feeling. She didn't care for it. The mattress finally passed through the doorway of her bedroom and into the living room. She closed the bedroom door behind her and took a rest, leaning her head against the mattress. With her face pressed against the mattress, her nose was flooded with the smell of stale pot smoke, another unpleasant reminder of the past. It took some time, but she eventually pushed the mattress across the living room to the door of her apartment. She swung the door open and began to slowly shove the mattress into the hallway. Her neighbor walked by and said hello, but didn't offer to help. Sam gave a quick smile and then gave him the finger behind his back as he walked away.

Sam took her phone out again and called her dad. While it was ringing, her eyes fixed on the stains on the mattress. That would be awkward. When her father finally answered, all she could get out was, "I meant to call Dan, sorry dad." She didn't know a Dan.

She slid the mattress inch by inch to the stairwell at the end of the hall and began the arduous task of pushing the mattress up the stairs to street level. It was just the one flight of stairs, but it seemed impossibly steep and impossibly long for only a very small woman. Sam tried to get her shoulder underneath and push, but the mattress spun off of her shoulder and knocked her over. She gathered herself and tried again, this time successfully getting underneath it, but failing to make much progress.

At last, Sam managed to move the mattress up three steps. She sighed, paused, and shouted, "FUCK." She dropped the mattress on the stairs and walked back into to her apartment, not bothering to lock the door behind her. She wandered the living room for a few minutes before the exhaustion hit her. She went to the bedroom, hoping to get some sleep. She looked around. The mattress was gone, and things seemed different. She scanned the room and her eyes fell on the leg lamp once more. She wrapped herself in the blankets that used to cover the bed, curled up on the floor, and tried her best to fall asleep.

My Way Or The Highway

It was late September and we were happy. I had moved into Kelly's apartment with her and we were spending more time together than ever. Life was good.

By late October everything was falling apart. Many of my charms had quickly worn off and become irritating, chief among them my tendency to sing the entirety of Limp Bizkit's "Rollin'" incessantly in my sleep.

In December, she left for good. It was my fault really, I refused to compromise on any of the major issues. I realized later that it probably wasn't necessary to be so steadfast in my belief that we should listen to "Break Stuff" on repeat at the dinner table every night. Also she really didn't like hot dog flavored water.

Board Games

We stayed up until 5 in the morning playing Don't Wake Daddy. Neither of us were very good, probably due to a general lack of understanding of the core concept. When we lost, we genuinely felt like we were in trouble.

But we were 27 and we were in love and we could stay up as late as we wanted and we never could figure out how to play Risk and at least half the pieces were missing from Mouse Trap.

The Flood

The flood destroyed most of our worldly possessions. The house was uninhabitable, the car floated down the street (less-than-affectionately nicknamed “Canal Street”), and all of our electronics were ruined. All we had left was each other and my life-sized painting of Hulk Hogan bodyslamming Andre The Giant. And then you left. So now it’s just me, Hulk, and Andre.

We’ll be okay.

3

Connections

Imagine

Kevin was exceptionally imaginative. His parents always told him that anything he put his mind to, he could make happen, and this was truer than they knew. By age six, Kevin could build skyscrapers purely by force of will. When his concentration broke, the buildings crumbled to the Earth and disappeared as instantly as they had appeared. What made him such an exceptional child, though, was that everyone else could see these projections. He could quite literally imagine things into being.

There was another catch, though. Kevin could form these projections, but whenever a person tried to touch them, they would crumble as though Kevin had lost his focus. No matter how intricate the systems that Kevin could imagine, he could not manage to make them tangible.

When Kevin was fourteen, his parents separated. It wasn't his fault, he was assured. He wanted to believe it, but he was fourteen. His parents finalized the divorce inside of the year and Kevin went to live with his mom. He only saw his dad on the weekends. At night, in his bedroom at his mom's apartment, Kevin would perfectly recreate his father with his imagination. But he couldn't give his father a hug.

Kevin hatched a plan to use his imagination to make his mother love his father again. He would project images of his father lovingly looking at her and his mother would go into her room, shut the door, and audibly weep. He didn't like seeing his mother upset, but he couldn't bear the state that his family was in, so he kept at it. His mother became skilled at ignoring the projections, knowing that they were just Kevin's willful thinking, his naivete, manifested.

When Kevin turned eighteen, he moved out of his mom's place and got his own apartment across town. He stopped sharing his projections with

others. But at night, when he went to bed, he'd project his father and his mother laying on the couch in his childhood living room. But he couldn't make them touch, or they'd shatter. He couldn't bring them back together.

Modern Men

Eric grew up in a remote town more than 100 miles from civilization. He was brought up in a society where there were no automobiles, no television, and not even electricity of any kind. Not knowing any better, Eric lived his life as though this was the typical modern life.

One day, a fellow inhabitant of the town, Craig, entered Eric's room and presented him with a light bulb. "I just came up with this thing, it's called electricity, it lets me generate power." Eric was stunned.

The next day, Craig came into Eric's room and gave him a television. "Using electricity, I can power this machine and pick up messages from around the world." Eric was stunned, yet again.

The following day, Craig came into Eric's room with a DVD player and a single DVD. He handed it to Eric and told him to watch it before leaving. Eric sat enraptured by the film for about 100 minutes, but then during the final eight minutes became enraged. He walked over to Craig's room, thrust the copy of "The Village" into his chest and said, "go fuck yourself."

Friends

Mark met Sadie on twitter. They had a mutual friend in Jen, a funny and charming tweeter in her own right, but this story is about Mark and Sadie. Mark saw a tweet of Jen's making reference to having a fun time with Sadie, and he made a joke. It was a simple joke, but Sadie enjoyed it and she followed Mark as a result. Mark followed her back; she seemed to have a good sense of humor (she liked Mark's joke!) and if Jen was her friend, she was probably a good person.

They started talking to one another via twitter direct messages, something Mark had never done much of, and got to know each other quite well. Mark found Sadie instantly charming; she sent her messages with an admirable sense of reckless abandon, resulting in hilarious typos and sometimes utter nonsense. But it was the ease with which she laughed off these mistakes that really drew Mark to her. Mark didn't realize he needed a friend like Sadie until he had found her. She lived far away and she was a bit older than he was, but he knew quickly that he had found a lasting friendship.

Sadie was there to talk Mark through his lows and to listen to him ramble on about his highs. If Sadie was going through a tough time, Mark would do his best to listen and give his honest opinion. More than anything, he just wanted Sadie to understand that he was there if she needed him. But more than anything else, Mark made Sadie laugh, and he liked to think she really appreciated that. He certainly appreciated her.

Lucky

James posted a craigslist ad in an effort to sell two tickets to the big Tommy Tutone show. The ad simply read “\$50 for the pair or best offer.”

James hadn’t anticipated the gravity of the phrase, “or best offer.” Soon after he posted the ad, he received a veritable flood of emails containing offers for his tickets. The value of these offers, monetary or otherwise, varied greatly. One such offer was \$7 and an unopened pack of pokemon cards. Another was more lascivious, but the attached photo was only of the back seat of an Ford Aerostar. Another still contained simply a number to contact a person named Jenny.

James had all but lost hope that he might receive an offer of any substance, but when he checked his email on the morning of the concert, he discovered that he had been offered of a free iPad. A further investigation revealed that he simply needed to fill out a survey to receive this iPad. This was almost too good to be true. James needed an iPad, he needed to part ways with these tickets, and he was an avid survey taker. Satisfied with himself and this offer, James mailed the tickets to the Nigerian prince who had sent him the email about the iPad and spent his entire day doing the very thing he loved most: filling out surveys on the internet.

Connections

Sean and Jill became best friends in preschool. Through the use of their less than fully-formed brains, they created a language that only they could understand. It had its own organic syntax and grammar and Sean and Jill always understood one another. For years, Sean and Jill drove others crazy, flaunting this language like a pair of matching members-only jackets. When Sean and Jill were in the 7th grade, Sean's family moved away and the two eventually lost touch.

Twenty years later, in a bar in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Sean was drinking himself into a stupor, having all but given up on himself. Things weren't going well in his personal or professional life, and nothing on the horizon gave him any hope that things would change. Sean woke up the next day to a text message that contained a string of would-be gibberish from an unknown number, and he knew that everything was going to be alright.

Sean and Jill always understood one another.

Copycats

Craig watched every episode of Breaking Bad six times and, willfully ignorant of the show's theme, decided he wanted to start making meth in his RV. He escaped the explosion, but he could not escape arrest.

Max watched Mad Men obsessively in his bedroom and found himself drinking compulsively. In other words, nothing had changed.

James watched three episodes of Dexter and decided that he could probably get away with killing some people that he felt deserved it. His attempt to murder the math teacher who was mean to him in high school was unsuccessful when he realized he didn't know how to unravel the plastic wrap a moment too late, allowing his would-be victim to escape and alert the police.

Kelly watched Game of Thrones and started LARPing in the local park. She wasn't hurting anyone, but it sure did make them uncomfortable.

Bob never cared much for TV, but he had a cast of imaginary characters with whom he interacted. Bob ended up institutionalized, but he never quite understood how he was any different from anyone else.

Artistic Integrity

The artist constantly honed his craft by painting his self-portrait. Day after day, he would paint himself with the goal to improve upon his efforts from the previous day. This continued for over twenty-eight years before he deemed himself ready. He painted one final self-portrait on a canvas that was seventy feet tall and forty feet wide. He put it on sale on craigslist with the asking price of five million dollars and seventy-five cents, plus shipping and handling. After two hours with no replies, he paints the words "YOU DON'T GET IT" on his computer screen and curls into a ball in the corner of the room, sobbing uncontrollably. Fourteen minutes later, someone sends over an offer to trade his couch and four hundred dollars for the painting, but the artist will never see it.

2017: A Television Odyssey

The year is 2017. There are over twelve thousand television channels available and they all show nothing but Franklin & Bash. Universally heralded as the greatest show ever created, Franklin & Bash is also responsible for world peace. All the nations of the world have agreed to set aside their differences in exchange for a seventh and final season of Franklin & Bash.

Things were looking bleak for the show, and for world peace, when acclaimed actor Malcolm McDowell became a cyborg during the filming of the season six episode, "Blind Injustice." A rogue artificial intelligence took over his brain and insisted that he simply repeat the line, "MI-CHAEL MYERS IS DEAD, D-E-A-D" every three minutes. However, the ever-brilliant writers managed to work it into the script while simultaneously writing McDowell out of the show. In the season six finale, Franklin laments the loss of McDowell's character in a tearful eulogy befitting of a series finale. However, a groundswell of fan support and lots of pressure to avoid a nuclear holocaust convinced the creative team to soldier on for a seventh season.

In Hot Springs, Arkansas, a twenty-seven year old man named Sasha watches his old DVD copies of *The Wire* and longs for days gone by. All the while, a hologram of David Simon stands in the corner of the room, shaking his head and telling Sasha to get over it. But Sasha doesn't like things the way they are; sure, world peace is great and all, but he thinks Franklin & Bash lacks the gravitas of his favorite shows.

Meanwhile, in Topeka, Kansas, the DVD menu music for *Mad Men* plays on a loop. Jane, the thirty-three year old former television critic has fallen asleep during a marathon of season four. She dreams, literally and figuratively, of a time when she could review her favorite shows and

make a living at it. Now, she barely makes ends meet writing episode recaps of Franklin & Bash for VICE magazine.

Sasha and Jane might have met in a different timeline, but in this post-Franklin & Bash world, they are destined to wallow in two separate, but equally miserable pits of angst, refusing to accept that Franklin & Bash saved the world. They are the only two remaining souls who are anti-Franklin & Bash, but they would never dare speak of it, for fear of ridicule, prosecution, and persecution. They will never find each other, but maybe they can take comfort in being able to reference *The Wire* to all their friends in their dreams.

4

Solitude

Dedication

Martin rents out four motel rooms at the very end of the building in an effort to seclude himself from the other guests. He has brought several weeks worth of ramen and water, and moved himself into the room furthest from other people. He sets up his laptop and opens up an old version of FruityLoops and he gets to work. Martin is determined to create the greatest hip-hop album of all time using only his outdated software and the microphone in his laptop. He spends three weeks in this motel room, never leaving or making contact with the outside world. Finally, on a Thursday morning, he puts one last drum loop on a track called “America,” and declares the album finished. All told, his album (titled simply *Martin*) is just over sixteen minutes long and contained seven tracks. The centerpiece is “Canada,” a five minute track about life in Canada.

Energized by the completion of *Martin*, Martin charges out of the hotel room playing the album at top volume through his laptop speakers, which is, in reality, not very loud at all. When Martin finally gets over his euphoria, he looks around and notices that everything is on fire. There is no one as far as the eye can see, and Martin begins to feel alone. He retreats into the motel room and checks the internet for news. He finds a post for four days prior detailing the forthcoming meteor that threatened to wipe out humanity. This appeared to be the last post on the internet by anyone. Miraculously, the power and internet seemed intact in this ratty motel, but it seemed as though the rest of the world had been destroyed.

Martin opens up his blog, starts a new post titled “Martin Unanimously Named Greatest Hip-Hop Album Of All Time.” The post simply reads, “every living person loves *Martin*, the new album from Martin. It is the best thing ever. These drum loops are the shit.”

Caves

There exists a hidden cavern somewhere off the coast of California that serves as refuge for the lonely. Those lucky few who manage to find their way to this cove are greeted with echoes from past visitors. The cavern echoes infrequently on an unfathomable delay, causing messages to be lost to its depths for years at a time. Each visitor to the cavern contributes to a dialogue spanning several generations that serves as a reminder that they are not alone.

Carved into the wall of the cavern is a message that reads, “do not lose yourself.”

Though the cave provides relief to those who are in need, it also traps those who are susceptible to its allure. The overwhelming sense of consolation and solace that it provides ensures that some of its visitors will never leave.

Remember

He woke up in a strange bed with no recollection of who or where he was. As far as he could tell, he was alone and unharmed, apart from a splittig headache. He rolled over, climbed out of the bed, and staggered through the nearby doorway. He made his way into the kitchen of the small apartment that he had woken up in. On the counter next to a scrap of paper was a DVD copy of the film Memento.

He started to watch the movie, taking careful notes on the back of the scrap of paper he had found next to the DVD. Whoever had left this DVD for him was trying to help him. Or they were responsible for all of this. He fell asleep towards the end but he was pretty sure he knew what was going on.

When he woke up again he went out to find the nearest tattoo parlor. He had the artist tattoo the script to Memento along nearly every inch of his flesh, in case he forgot. He regretted it almost immediately. He returned to the apartment to find himself locked out.

Turned away from the only place he knew, he simply left. He wandered the country for the rest of his days, knowing only the plot to Memento and that he really wished he didn't have those tattoos.

On the floor of the apartment he had woken up in, on the other side of his Memento notes was a message that read, "Greg, I'm off to work, I hope you're okay, you bumped your head pretty hard last night. Can you take this DVD back to Mark's for me if you're feeling up to it? Love you, Jane."

Crime And Punishment

Will spent all of his spare time reading Dostoyevsky, which meant that he also had a lot of spare time. It's sort of hard to make friends when all you want to talk about is *Crime and Punishment*.

At 23, Will drafted his will – that is, his last will and testament—in case anything should ever happen to him. At his funeral, he wished for there to be a reading from *Crime and Punishment*, serving as a metaphor for how all of the bad things he had done in his life were balanced out by the subsequent good he did. At 23, he had done his share of bad, he hadn't quite gotten around to the good, but he'd get there.

By 49, Will had given up on doing good, and he sort of forgot about the will. But if anyone showed up to his funeral, the whole thing might be kind of funny.

Light

I saw the light coming off of a lamp in the window of an apartment on my way home from work. It was a dark and cold night in Boston and I couldn't help but be drawn to the light. From then on, I looked for the light every night on my walk home from work. It shone like a beacon, letting me know that I was nearing my destination.

It didn't take long for curiosity to get the better of me. After three weeks of walking past the light, I took a sharp right turn up the steps of the apartment. I slipped in the door as a resident made her way out and I climbed the stairs to the third floor, towards the apartment from which the light emanated. I walked to the corner apartment, knowing all too well that this was it. I knocked on the door, and no one answered. I could hear rustling inside, but despite my repeated knocking, there was no answer.

I left defeated and went back to my usual ritual, walking home, spotting the light, and continuing on my way. But I was still drawn to the light. I was a goddamn moth and it was the flame that would almost surely be the death of me. I spent the ensuing months thinking about a return to the apartment, but never could bring myself to do it.

A little over a year after I had first spotted the light, when I was making my way home, I noticed that there was no light. The window was dark and empty, not even the silhouette of the lampshade visible from the outside. It threw me off. These little things become routine, changes can be jarring.

That light never turned back on. I'd walk by occasionally, not even coming back from work, just to see if the light came back. It was just dark. I went back inside and knocked on the door again, no answer. Not even

rustling. Just silence. And darkness.

I walked home a different way from then on.

Caroline

Caroline was thirty-four and she lived alone. The only person she had ever loved was her best friend growing up, Jenna. Jenna was beautiful and smart and clever and she was all that Caroline thought about for years. They met when they were both six, Caroline was already disillusioned with her home life; her step father was verbally abusive and her mother was a drunk, neither seemed to care much for Caroline one way or another. But Jenna lived next door and she never judged Caroline for anything and she was just so beautiful and so smart. The two of them were inseparable all the way up through high school, but Jenna got into college and Caroline was barely passing. They'd still see each other during the summers and Caroline thought about one day maybe telling Jenna how she felt.

But then Jenna got married to a guy named Craig, which Caroline always thought was such an ugly name. They seemed really happy, which Caroline always thought was so disgusting. Three years later, Jenna died in a car wreck, and Caroline didn't take it well. It wasn't so much a mental breakdown as it was a complete retreat from society. She lived off an inheritance that her grandmother had left to her parents and that ended up in Caroline's hands purely by default. The last living heir to this shitty family fortune, Caroline was set for life. Or for however long sixty-seven thousand dollars could last a person.

So Caroline ordered take out four nights a week and she ordered enough to last her several meals and for more than one day. She'd leave the money in an envelope on the door and insist the food be left on her doorstep. Only twice had raccoons gotten to it before she could.

Caroline was thirty-four when she passed away. It wasn't peaceful and it wasn't poetic; she drank herself to death out of pure grief.

Craig wondered about how Caroline was doing every so often, but he never bothered to check. He had remarried a couple of months after Jenna passed and was enjoying a mostly happy existence. But still, his name was Craig; Caroline always thought that was such an ugly name.

Solitaire

Iris spent a lot of her free time playing solitaire. She worked long hours at her data entry job for a company whose politics she found abhorrent. She'd walk into her house, which smelled of either stale cigarette smoke or fresh cigarette smoke—depending on whether or not she was smoking at the time—and sit down at the kitchen table with her cards and a whiskey sour. She played a lot of games, lost in thought, just going through the motions. Flip. Move the three of hearts onto the four of clubs. Flip. Move the ace up. Flip. She had nothing else.

Iris wasn't conventionally attractive, and she didn't draw a lot of attention to herself. But her boss, Dan Stevenson, focused on her all the same. He told her she'd look great if she lost fifteen pounds and tried out some new makeup. Everything he said was so innuendo-laden that it was hard to discern its literal meaning. She wanted to scream, or report him, or just punch his lights out, but she needed the job. He was no prize himself, a balding forty-something who wore ill-fitting dress shirts and high-waisted pants. Dan spent an inordinate amount of his time at work criticizing Iris' performance, claiming that she wasn't working hard enough. Iris thought Dan would be more productive if he spent less of his work day looking at porn. And not even internet porn; Dan had a flip phone and he jerked off to dusty old magazines in his office with the blinds not closed quite as well as he thought.

She'd been working this job for nearly three years now, barely making enough to pay the bills. But she didn't have any particularly valuable skills to bring to the workforce, and she lacked the confidence to make a move. And so she fell into her routine. She worked, she came home, and she played solitaire. Flip. Flip. Flip. Nothing. Game over.

Her first two years at the job, she followed this routine five days a week

with little to no deviation. She didn't care for the company of others, a sentiment only exacerbated by Dan's treatment of her. A few months into year three of Iris working this job, she made a slight change to her routine. Every few games of solitaire, when she reached a dead-end, she dug into the piles buried underneath her card stacks and find the card she needed. This kept the game alive a bit longer. It gave her another chance to win.

Work didn't get any better. Iris would show up on time and do her damndest to avoid Dan's ire or lechery, and just do her job. Typing all day can be pretty monotonous, but Iris didn't mind monotonous. What she did mind was the sea of coworkers who might as well have been mannequins. They didn't talk to her. They didn't talk to each other. There was no camaraderie, no bond between coworkers. It was just Iris and sometimes Dan. Iris liked Iris a lot more than she liked Dan, and Iris wasn't that fond of Iris.

Eventually Iris was winning every game of solitaire. She'd stuff aces into the deck in the right positions before she even started playing, making sure she could get her piles started early. She'd flip her three cards over and pick whichever one she needed, or hell, all three. Flip. Flip. Flip. Move the queens up. Move the king to the empty space. Flip. Move the kings up. Game over, Iris wins again.

She wasn't fooling anyone, there wasn't even anyone to fool, but she really just needed the win.

5

This Is The End

Moving

On the day we moved out of our old house, we found a box of old VHS tapes in the basement. We took them with us, just in case, when we moved into our new place. They got stuck in a closet in a room we barely ever use and we just forgot about them. My wife mentioned them in passing a few weeks back and after that I just couldn't get them out of my head.

Yesterday while she was at work and I was at home with the kids, I decided to dig them out. The labels were worn off the few of them that had been titled and each tape was covered in dust. We still had an old combo DVD/VHS player in the living room, so I carried the box out there and sat it down in front of the TV. I made sure the kids were out of the room and the TV was muted, because honestly, who knows what these things could have been. I was relatively sure I hadn't recorded them, which meant that they either belonged to my wife or they belonged to the family who owned the old house before us.

The first tape was a home movie—definitely not my wife—of a boy and his father watching an old boxing match on a tiny color television. The boy sat in his father's lap and they cheered and shadowboxed along. They seemed happy. The second tape was much the same. Seemed like a different fight, but I've never been much of a boxing aficionado and their TV was awfully small. The third tape followed the theme, the father and son watching fights together.

Eventually I dug down towards the bottom of the pile and I found that this tape was of one of the old boxing matches, Ali vs. Foreman, the "Rumble In The Jungle." I went back to the first few tapes and found the boy and his father watching this very fight. I dug around the pile a bit more and I found a video of the boy, now in his early teens, watching

the same fight with his father. And finally one more video of the boy, probably about sixteen now, watching the same fight, alone. He no longer seemed happy. Something was missing. Someone was missing.

When my wife got home from work, she found me in the living room covered in dust and weeping. The kids had been asleep for hours. I tried to explain it to my wife, but I couldn't articulate what I was feeling. It was something like loss, or maybe regret. I just wanted to go back and put the box where we found it in the old house, where it belonged. It was left there on purpose. No one needed these tapes anymore.

The Fresh Prince Of Despair

In an effort to remain useful in 2094, at the age of 126, Will Smith takes a job as a greeter at a Wal-Mart Corporation space station. As passengers disembark, Will sighs and mutters, “welcome to Earth.” He hands these people a smiley face sticker patterned to look like the Earth and he thinks about the way things used to be. He thinks about all the great times he had filming the Legend of Bagger Vance with his close and personal friend Matt Damon. Matt Damon had succumbed to the harsh realities of old age several years before when he was brutally murdered by his butler.

Will Smith thinks back to his youth and thinks about how his parents would never understand space travel and then he sighs loudly and mumbles “welcome to Earth” to the next passenger. Will Smith is very sad.

Dummy

A virus spreads throughout the United States that causes everyone except for the middle aged to fall into comas. In the 2020 Presidential election, Jeff Dunham wins in a landslide based purely on write-in votes. His inauguration speech is not only a ventriloquist act, but it is also horribly racially insensitive (as all Jeff Dunham acts tend to be). With each State of the Union address, the country gains new enemies as Dunham creates new, more offensive dummies to demonstrate his foreign policy (his foreign policy is “ew, people who aren’t American!” but said through the filter of an old, racist ventriloquist dummy).

Jeff Dunham inadvertently starts World War 3 as other nations grow tired of his mockery. He is quickly forced into hiding, releasing statements only through the form of secret broadcasts, wherein ventriloquist dummies claim that he was “totally just joking you guys.” Eventually he is arrested and tried for violating the Geneva Conventions or something and he disappears forever. A new bill is passed into law that outlaws ventriloquism on account of its creepiness and general lack of a need to exist. Oh and all those people eventually come out of their comas and wake up to a better world, a world free of ventriloquism.

Legends Of The Post-Apocalyptic Temple

When society broke down and the world descended into chaos, a number of groups formed from the ashes. Many of these groups mirrored certain belief systems or political structures from the world these people once knew, but one group stood out from the rest. This one group managed to amass the largest fortune of any group and they were more than happy to share their wealth with others who proved worthy. This group, known simply as The Temple Guards, built a perfect recreation of the temple set from Legends of the Hidden Temple and hid their treasure in the heart of the temple.

Those who came in search of the treasure were forced to enter the temple and solve a series of astonishingly easy tasks in order to gain access to the loot. Against all odds, every person who ever tried to claim this treasure failed miserably while their friends watched from afar and yelled about how easy it looked.

Zombies

He wrote short stories about the zombie apocalypse. He thought he had a fresh take on the genre. He envisioned films, television series, and full length novels. But he died, and he stayed dead. Dead forever.

Alone

The last living human opens his laptop and checks his OKCupid profile. He has three messages from a woman he never got a chance to meet. He feels less alone.

Net Gain

In May of 2015, the internet was taken down for the greater good of humanity. There would have been riots and protests, but no one could figure out how to organize them without facebook or twitter. Slowly but surely, the people found their own methods for dealing with the change. Rather than telling jokes on twitter, some people were reduced to shouting jokes out the window of a moving car at pedestrians and telling them to retweet them. If the pedestrians enjoyed the joke, they could retweet it by telling the joke to a friend later, but this whole process just became akin to a giant, incoherent game of telephone.

Chaos reigned supreme as kids “liked” statuses of their friends actually doing things by walking up to them and announcing it. Craigslist became a street corner in every city where people sold couches, met for sexual encounters, and bought and sold used tupperware—sometimes all at once. It was hell on earth.

In June of 2015, the last of the polar bears finally passed on and Al Gore decided that the world needed the internet back. After an arduous process spanning thirty minutes, Gore was able to plug the internet back in. It was just a big plug. The half an hour was really just Al Gore staring at the outlets on the wall and figuring out which thing to unplug so he could plug the internet back in. He unplugged his polar bear lamp, it just seemed fitting at the time.

Happy

It made me happy to know that you were happy. I couldn't see you anymore, they weren't going to let me out of the hospital, they said that I was unstable and a danger to society. I'm okay with that. If you're happy, I'm happy. Maybe someday you'd come and see me, but I doubted it.

Your husband was never my biggest fan and I get it, but he never would hear me out. No one really ever wanted to hear me out. You used to listen to me. That's why you were so special to me. That's why I wanted you to be happy. That made me happy.

Supernova

The Earth collides with the sun and everyone is incinerated except for the mother of dragons, don't you watch *Game of Thrones*? She quickly suffocates from a lack of oxygen.

The Next Episode

After years of speculation, rumor, and doubt, it was finally ready. Dr. Dre had finished *Detox*. It was a labor of love, a rap album that some had said would never see the light of day. Upon its completion, Dr. Dre decided to celebrate by watching internet pornography.

And Dr. Dre said, “I think I will watch some internet pornography to celebrate.”

Dr. Dre logged on to his favorite pornography website and began browsing around.

And Dr. Dre said, “Ah, yes, here we are. This is some of the pornography that I enjoy.”

Dr. Dre clicked on a pornographic video on this website. Suddenly, he was inundated with pop-ups and his computer crashed. Upon a reboot, Dr. Dre found that his computer was infected with a virus that was slowly deleting his hard drive. And so, Dr. Dre watched, helpless, as *Detox* was destroyed. The only copy of the album flushed down the toilet by internet pornography.

A single tear rolled down Dr. Dre’s cheek. He added fresh \$20 bills to the inside of his pillow case, fluffed the pillow, and settled in for a night of restless sleep.

An End

When we went to see Grandma in the hospital, we knew that she didn't have much time. It wasn't as sad as you might expect; she had scratched and clawed and lived like a badass for ninety-four years. Ninety-four. That's one hell of a life.

She didn't have much energy left, and she was only intermittently lucid, so we made the best of our visit. We spent hours at her bedside, never wanting to forget all that she had meant to us. I don't remember a lot of stuff from that day, but I remember all of the things that I thought about in that room. A lifetime of my own memories of her, the stories she'd told me, the things she had done for me, I made sure I'd never forget that stuff. If I grew older and couldn't remember her in a hospital, immobilized and in pain, maybe that was for the best.

I do remember one specific thing from that day though. In a moment of clarity, or pure, perfect nonsense—I'll never be sure which—my grandmother said, "all good things must come to an end." It was like she knew. Or maybe she didn't. I just thought it was beautiful.