

LA VITA
ETERNA

SC

AJT



Prelude, but a longer one

There are a lot of things which went into the writing of this book. 'Free Time Taylor' was at it the whole time; this book was started in late 2019, right after the release of Ducc. Hopefully, by the time you re-read this several years down the line, Ducc II might have been finished, and Ducc I might have been 'remastered' with a tighter plot, less characters and more entertaining dialogue.

Either way, if you're reading these in chronological order (and there is no reformatting that takes place), the format which you are accustomed to reading all the way through Ducc is now going to leave. Oh dear - no more awkwardly spaced paragraphs and half the text that would have fit in a normally sized page. Yes, proper formatting now. Well, as close to proper as I can be bothered to make it. Seriously. Imagine writing a book but not knowing how the book formatting worked? It seems wrong.

Either way, hopefully I won't have to put a disclaimer in here at any point, I hope that all similarities to any person living or dead are purely coincidental. Of course, unless it's absolutely plot-critical. There are a few lesser known people who feature in this book. Names have been changed, companies have been altered, but the world is no different to the one we live in. Sort of. As close as you can get in a fictional world. It's not really a fictional world, of course, but there are references to things you might know.

Since my last work of fiction appeared to show an 'unfamiliarity with laws surrounding libel' I would have to remind them that seeing their favourite departmental sweetheart lead a cult of plastic-toy obsessed desert-dwellers to commit atrocious acts to take over kingdoms is not exactly going to be representative of the person as a *person*. Furthermore, I invite those people to read the disclaimer at the start of the book, if they haven't already. And if they have, then I implore them to re-read it for posterity.

But yes, have fun reading this - it is better than Ducc, I promise.
Seriously.

A special thanks to:
Marion & Ian Taylor
Lesley Walls
Teehan Page
Nathan Montague
Karl Anderson
Ed

and everyone else who bought a copy of Ducc.

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Come In Alone

There I sat, whiling away my time. Time I never had, and never wanted to have, really. To be honest, this whole immortality thing was worse of a deal than it seemed, the deaths of friends, the loss of loved ones, everything you have that you think will be irreplaceable forever, then it very suddenly is, and it turns to ash in your hands, and you lose it.

The fire is full of ash. It needs cleaning, a job that can wait for as long as I can. Forever, really. I could sit in this chair forever, no need to eat, sleep, or to maintain myself in any way. An earthquake could happen, however unlikely, and bury me under the earth. But, if no one finds me, eventually, over thousands upon thousands of years, I could claw myself out of even the strongest of rocks. And yet, having spent a many days musing on this sort of thing, the fire is still full of ash. It won't go away.

And that's the thing with ash, it is no longer what it was, but it is still there. You can maybe imagine what it was, or if you knew what it was, you can remember. But it's fickle, and it gets everywhere if it builds up. A fine layer of it can coat everything you love if you let it build up. Don't let the ashes settle.

What I'm trying to say is, 'Don't let the past keep coming back. Preserve what you have.' Reminiscing is good, and all, but reality is better. It's a one way street, reality. You can't have memories without it, but memories can't exist outside of reality.

At least, that's what I thought until recently. You see... well... it's hard to explain concisely. The kettle is almost done now, you can tell by the whistling noise. I've heard that whistle maybe ten thousand times now. And I don't drink an awful lot of tea. See how the water inside is all clean, no limescale whatsoever? That's spring water for you. Right from the river outside.

Sometimes, well, to me it feels quite often, the river freezes over. I have to go out there and break open the surface layer, and if that

doesn't work, I have to haul chunks of ice in through the door, and put them in this pot right here. It's getting slightly rusty where the zinc coating has worn off. It's a shame, it was going to be a hundred years old soon. I tried to learn how to galvanise things just so I could keep it longer.

The kettle's ready. Want anything? No? No worries. I reassure you, I'm an expert in tea. I've tried nearly every tea in the world, and been to quite a few places where they grow it. Worked at a factory making teabags for a few weeks, I think. Pretty much every step of the chain in tea making, really. I've had most of the jobs. Wouldn't like to pick the tea leaves, really. Either way, doesn't matter. I have milk, if you'd like. It's not fresh. There's a farm over the valley.

Yes, it does clash with the rest of the room. You know, if there's one thing I couldn't live without, it'd be that fridge. Had one since they came along, haven't looked back since. At one point, I was tempted to haul ice down from Scotland to just north of Cornwall to make some money, but even I felt that was a waste of time - and I don't worry about time.

Here's yours. Be careful, it's hot. I don't have any biscuits, haven't been to the bakery in a few days. Harsh conditions and all. Should have gone out yesterday, it was alright. The town is lovely, it's quite scenic. You probably passed through it on your way here. I do things here and there for the people there. They're reclusive individuals, really. But a real strong sense of community, unlike most towns I've been to recently. Tell you what, why don't we walk over there and I'll tell you all I have to know. How's about it? And don't worry about the tea, just leave it by the fire. It's full enough.

The garden's a recent project of mine. Some nice orange lights here and there, coupled with the bitter frost of an evening creates a lovely atmosphere, it really does. Now, if only they would turn on properly. Well, another job for future me. Add it to the list of things you have to do.

Remind me again, this is your... first meeting with me? Yes? It's been a few weeks since my last one. Not many people come at this time of year. Do you think you've changed your mind about the whole

immortality thing? You're not sure? Alright then. Close the gate as we leave.

That headstone there is of my wife. Oh, don't be sorry. I'm okay. No, she's been gone a few years now, but the memory still rolls around my head far too often. I suppose she was the last individual I really learned to love, or at the very least the last one I stuck around with for long enough. I'm sure if I stuck around for a while longer, I could find someone. Don't let the ashes settle, am I right? The headstone isn't marked because I think it's... it's better that way. Not sure why. It just helps. Remembrance without sadness. She would have wanted it.

This part up ahead is slippery when it's been snowing, and if we're lucky, the rockier path will have melted because of the sun earlier. Sometimes it's too cloudy, and everything is just suffocating under this layer of snow, you see. It's quite nice to look at, but I'm always underprepared for it. Regular trousers don't cut it up here, which is a real problem for me and my... limited wardrobe. Most of my trousers are fading already. I suppose I should sell them as vintage items now, some of them have stolen civil war badges still on them, and I think I have a jacket with a Victoria Cross on it somewhere. Not either of the world wars, the Crimean one. What a war! Never phased me that I was in the HMS Beagle. Thought it was the same one that old Charles Darwin used. Turns out I was wrong. Not the same one.

The thing about getting awards like that is that you have to replace someone. You can't just exist if you were born several hundred years before the conflict occurred. The authorities don't like that at all. That's going to throw up some serious red flags, and even if it doesn't, then enjoy being pestered by the Guinness World Records people. Thankfully I haven't had a third run in with them yet, the first one being the fact I gave this guy the idea for the book. Never knew it at the time, he was an argumentative old bastard who disagreed with me about some menial fact, but it turns out it would eventually come back to bite me when I set a world record for fastest reading at some point. Silly record, really. Got an interview off the back of it, but it

never really went anywhere, and I'm glad it didn't. Went missing a few years back, and now I'm here.

This is a nice clearing, the snow hasn't been disturbed by anything, there's barely any wildlife here. Great place for having a barbecue, I imagine. Maybe in the summer. Blackened lines on charred lumps of meat at precise thirty degree angles. All sorts of meats you'd like to try, I bet. And no, I never did get to try any Dodo, it was hardly a 'cool' thing to do, so to speak. An old friend of mine said he wondered if he had been ripped off by his kitchen staff as it allegedly tasted exactly like chicken. I think that was his way of making sure no one else bought it and so the price would drop, allowing him to buy more. Unfortunately, when they went totally extinct a few years after, his servants decided they would keep serving him chicken under the pretence that it was dodo - and I have a feeling he died none the wiser.

Ah, but where were we? Barbecue. Yes, good place in the summer for a good old grill. Some of the people in the town that you came past on the way here come down here to see me sometimes, I'll have you know. I'm not a total recluse, although sometimes it may feel like it. Yes, there are quite a few of them. No, they don't wonder why I haven't died yet. Most of their parents knew me as a different man, I don't think they realise I'm still the same person as when I visited them as children.

So have you mulled it over? Alright, you're still thinking. That's okay, we'll just walk towards the town and get ourselves something to eat - haha - and we won't have to shoot it, either! But we can, if you're good with that kind of thing. No, haha, we're not savages, although sometimes it would be nicer if we were branded as such. Would make it a lot easier to keep the occasional tourist out. Stop them interfering with our way of life. That being said, I can't say much, most of the people who visit the town are here to visit me. That reminds me, you must stay for the duration of your appointment, you can't leave. I'm not trying to say that in an ominous or creepy way, or anything like

that. You just... you miss out on a lot. We might go out for a drive tomorrow. Down to the mine. Maybe.

Redwoods aren't as lovely as these ones right here - check out the bark on them! The town founders planted them a couple of hundred years back. Yeah, Foxwood. That's the name, and, you guessed it, hunting and logging is our game. More emphasis on the logging these days.

Wandering isn't all it's cracked up to be, there's only so many coastlines you can see before they all start to blur into one another, forming into one sun-drenched lump of blistered backs and vaguely soothing waters. Plus, half of them are on the arctic circle, and, desperate as I once was to try and see them all, I couldn't face it. Didn't need to eat, but I can still feel cold. I can still feel the pain.

Still feel the pain of when your loved ones go. Knowing that not only they are gone, but everything they ever knew is gone, too, and they live on in you, in your mind, you see, and you feel an obligation to keep thinking about them, keep on re-remembering them until the weight of the hundreds of people you have grown attached to severs the thin neurones in your brain, like herons on a telephone wire. When I heard the quote that says that "You have two deaths, one when you die, and the other when the last person thinks about you." I had to stop and collect up every shred of evidence that my friends lived, all those years ago. I became nigh obsessive, any house I occupied was stacked high with scrolls, then paintings, then photos, and now stacks of items that they bought, things they gave me. I'm lucky that their influence also lives on in my accent. That's right - it's an entirely unique blend of all the recent eras of modern language. Or English, at the least, I've spent the most time in English speaking countries.

English is my native language, but I've had to relearn how to use it over the years to avoid sounding silly and old, and with recent trends people who *look* my age find hard to keep up with, I am fully on top of things. Yes, I've ordered myself an answering machine. Got a manual and everything. After all, you have to read something to pass the time. What kind of books do you read? Not much of a reader? Oh,

you'll become one, alright, that's for sure. I suppose I was around when reading was a new thing for quite a lot of people, and then with the printing press being invented and all that - wow! I was just... just blown away by the fact we could actually print things quickly. Monks became worthless at that point - nobody wanted illuminated text at fifty times the cost when they could just buy a book. Maybe I might be misremembering the change a little too much. Maybe not.

One of the most surprising things that has changed over the years is the quality of clothes. Now, if you were a king or someone like that, back in the sixteenth century, your clothes would be pretty good. But the weaving was all done by hand, and was definitely imperfect - unless you were Henry VIII, apparently the bastard wanted everything to be just perfect. But if you look at the jacket you're wearing now, it's virtually perfect, and if you gave it to any king in the sixteenth century, they would accept it as some kind of wonderful, far-flung gift, perhaps keeping it with his spice collection. Yes, something like that. The things we get nowadays are just so... perfect in comparison.

My standards of living have been okay over the years, but sometimes I wish I could see into the future rather than having the ability to remember the past. Investing is still something I have to get my head around. Stopped after '29, couldn't be bothered with the whole 'boom' and 'bull' and whatever they say now. You're an investor, right? Do you think you could use that wisely, or would you end up playing it too safe and having to wait several decades for a payoff. Look on the bright side, at least you don't have to retire.

Ah! Ah-ha! Look! One of the hawks! It's usually really rare to see one of these, get a good look at that. Lovely. Yes, as I was saying, the wildlife is quiet around here until you see something cool like a hawk or perhaps a rabbit. Hopefully not both at the same time, the poor rabbit wouldn't stand a chance against that hawk. Big old claws.

Investing, yes. What do you invest in - sorry - I didn't ask to start with, didn't think it was the proper way to introduce myself. After all, you're the one who came here and would presumably like to ask some questions. Pharmaceuticals, right? It's almost ironic that that's the

case, you won't be needing any medicine for a while. Yes, you still get ill, but it's very temporary, it's very, very temporary indeed, and once you have something, you can't get it again. That being said, I don't think I'd like to test myself against the black plague once again - worst week of my life - and I've had a lot of weeks. Apparently some scientists have it kept in a vial somewhere. I feel that as long as that... thing is still around, no matter how safe and secure it is, that something will happen to it. Something will break into the lab, and while stealing... I don't know... grant money, they accidentally hit a shelf and it falls off and breaks, and suddenly most of Europe is dead again. But yes, most illnesses are completely fine, and I haven't been ailed by any long term medical issues either. I can only hope the same is for you.

The town is only about a mile up the path from here, don't worry. It's a lot shorter than driving because of the steepness. Adding to that, the roads get icy here - oh, you drove down here this morning anyway. Park in the town, I tell you, park in the town! Haha, they're really a nice bunch up there, they'd let you park on their roofs if you asked nicely. It's a secure town, too. Not to say that people are obsessed with security, quite the opposite. You hear about those little gated communities where everyone just leaves their stuff unlocked because they know no one will take it? That's just like this place. No one locks their doors - I mean, it is bad manners to go in without asking, but if you know your neighbours are out in the evening, but you need some flour for a cake, then you can just go in and get yourself some, and leave a note. I don't come up here too much, so I don't ever feel like I can go in. They'd probably be fine with it but it feels so alien to me after living in other, much more hostile places. I can't bring myself to even go in and say 'Hi' sometimes, it's just an odd thing to do. If they're not in, there's not much you can do to contact them. But that's besides the point.

So what did you think of the town while passing through? It's quite nice, right? Lots of greenery, though I suppose that is a given for such a rural, out of the way town. It's surprising we aren't classified as a hamlet, to be perfectly honest. I say 'we' but I really mean they, or it,

come to think of it. Either way, it's definitely small. And I don't think they care about how they are categorised, they enjoy being here because of the value of community, and the fact they can talk to people.

You're a city man yourself, I assume. How many people do you walk past every single day? Quite a lot, right? How many of those people do you recognise? Perhaps one, if you're lucky, maybe at a train platform, if you get there at precisely the right time. You can't grasp on to anything if you live in a city, if you get what I mean. Nothing is set. Everything is relative - you wait X minutes for a train, you wait Y minutes for a bus, you don't have a set routine, and to an extent, I love having that. The freedom which it offers you is wonderful, right, but there are certain downsides to living of your own accord for so long. Eventually, especially when you've lived as long as I have, the need for some routine to bring you back down is there. The need is there, like an itch at the base of your spine, ever present, hard to reach, hard to relieve. But then again, settling in to a routine where you can predict everything that is going to happen is bad too, there is a real danger into wasting forty years or so doing something you don't really enjoy. As a mortal, you may be able to currently justify yourself spending such amounts of time on such things by saying 'they fund my hobbies and the things I actually enjoy doing'. Eventually, you accumulate either enough money or apathy to let go of this job, and spend the rest of your life on a fixed income, wondering whether you will die before the money runs dry. Oh, and all the time you had for hobbies will be there now, but your body will have degraded by then.

I have seen this happen to hundreds of people I have known well, and I think it happens to almost all of us. All the billions of people around the world who spend the best years of their life working towards the worst years of their life. The whole concept of 'Golden Years' was obviously invented by someone who was rich enough to sail their way through to them by their mid-forties. For most people, the closest thing they will get to those golden years is a cheap veneer of gold-coloured paint on a plastic ring. It's not the same thing, and it

makes no attempt to be the real thing either. No attempt whatsoever. It's sad, honestly, watching legions of care-home dwellers clutching cheap replicas of the times they were promised.

I saw a news article recently about a care home which uses some sort of theming to let patients relive their memories better - there were some images in the article which scared me - facades of buildings, not entirely unlike the ones that inspired them, but in the eyes of the patients, they blur together into the same thing, memory overwritten by other people's poorly designed present. It is a good thing, but it's a good thing for a bad reason. The years that they worked far too hard in should have been spent looking around them in wonder of the world, and they could have explored every coast and country like I've tried to do, all without the ballast of a wheelchair and an attendant.

No one is immortal, you see. But I am. I look at people who work and work and work, thinking only of when they are going to die and how to accumulate enough money, and those people spend their entire lives as if they are never going to die, and then die having never lived. That's from the Dalai Lama, I think. Can't remember which one. Some of the people who've heard that call it trite or tacky, but I don't think it is. I think if you have to work for years doing something, it should be something you enjoy doing, not just for a means to an end, that end being money.

I'm not a hippie, I'm not one of those 'slacker' types either, I just think that with all of this modern technology, all sorts of computers that are being invented, that we could automate our jobs one day. One day, there will be middle management automata. Or 'robots', as most people know them as now. I think automata sounds more interesting.

Look, there's the top of the town up there. It's a saturday so most people will be sleeping in, it seems to be the unofficial holiday of this place. Yeah, most of the people in this town do things they enjoy doing, and they do them because they care about the town as well - they sell produce made by people here, for people here. Lovely little ecosystem we have, seemingly free from outside influence, no matter how hard it tries to creep in. There's a proper path to the left, just

round this trunk. You see it's got a bench carved into it? That's my work, I used to come here a lot more often and I figured I'd show people this view, maybe encourage them to follow the snowy tracks further down and visit me occasionally. I'm not bothered by their lack of will to trek down here, not in the least.

It's got some names carved into it, yes. Some kids who probably used to live in the town, right. Yes. Some of them have probably grown old and died in the time after they carved their names here. I re-carve them occasionally, as the marks fade from the trunks I have to trace them with great care, almost playing a game of chinese whispers with myself, every year or so. I'm not sure if the original carving said 'Jean and Bob' but that's what it says now. You try and think back to the moment they decided to carve that onto one of these trees, not caring for when it would disappear, living in the heat of the moment. You'd think I would be able to figure out who it was because there are only so many people in the town, but perhaps they got married and moved out.

If I had to raise a child here, I would. I think they'd socialise very well, but of course there's always the issue of culture shock if they got a job in the city. Plus, I haven't actually... properly finished raising any children yet. They'd ask questions when I didn't grow old with them. Ironically, being immortal shortens your average long-term relationship, your youth doesn't seem to go at the same rate as the other person, and by the time they die, people are looking at you celebrating your thirtieth anniversary thinking 'there's no way that man is even thirty'. I have to make myself look older, in a way. Grow more raggedy and scruffy facial hair, and when I move to a new place, cut it all off again, try and look as young as possible. It's a facade.

Over there is the town hall, lovely little art deco building - well, it sort of is, at the very least, I think some of the copper railings are real art deco, the rest has been replaced and slightly modernised. Look at those green railings. I remember when they were brown. Copper is an odd metal - oh! You know the Statue of Liberty? That was brown at

one point. It's weird to think about, to be honest. Imagine the Statue of Liberty being brown.

No, it was only a few months, it's not like it was brown for long. And imagine anything you have that's made of copper becoming green. I can't remember whether they still use copper in coins any more. Not the silver ones, no, on the outside. You just can't imagine change like that. People forget how things used to be quite quickly. I think that's one of the things I've noticed about people. They just move on, they move forward in spite of the horrible world around them. It's just strange. They don't learn.

Think about Germany. Still divided, right, but thirty years ago it was very much united under that swastika, and they were traipsing all over Europe, hungry for land to take and give to their people. People forgot that the average German liked the Nazis pretty quickly. I mean, maybe they didn't like the Nazis but they just sat back and let it happen. The West Germans are really making strides, though - you know that answering machine I was talking about earlier? I think it's a German invention. It's definitely European though. Probably not a Soviet state. Not sure if I'd be able to buy it if it was. They're secretive about everything they make.

The bakery is part café, too, it's quite a nice place to sit and talk. In fact, it's mostly a café. There's not really much of a bakery there, since it's pretty much the only restaurant in the town, apart from when there's someone making a communal roast. Oh, umm, that reminds me, I need to prove to you that *I'm* immortal in some way. I'll sort that out at some point. Oh, alright, sure. It's alright, some people just need closure of some kind.

The door's a bit stiff in the winter, the frame shrinks a bit. I've been meaning to learn how to - hi Rob! - fix things like this. This is Robert, good friend of mine, I know his dad, and so hopefully he's going to get a job up at the timber mill this spring. What are you up to right now, eh? On break, are we? Well, you're no longer on break - we'd just like some of your finest breads and spreads.

He's a good kid. Oh, surprisingly enough, the preserves we produce are surprisingly nice, considering how much sunlight we get on average - and the amount of snow we get during the growing months. Blueberries - you see. The nation's fruit- er... national fruit. Do you know what the US's national fruit is? Neither do I. Only reason I know our national fruit is because this region has a blueberry preserve contest which the farm enters each year. Sometimes there's a national contest as well, but they're quite rare. Plus, the more sun drenched parts of the country always win, if you can call them 'sun drenched'. It goes pretty simply - you have bare ground in March, you win. Simple. But that's not to say we're bad at it.

Of course, it's not that simple. Oh, thanks Rob. How's the car fund going, by the way? You got one? Since when? Well, that's great, isn't it. Your dad must be well pleased with you. How's mum? Good. Jackie and... the new one? Lovely. Well, you can be on break again. I won't keep you.

Yes... where were we? Ah, the blueberry contests. We enter a few other contests for various other bits of produce - actually, last year we came fourth nationwide in smoked salmon. Really? Well, I thought it was fourth. Someone must have told me something different. Anyway, you're supposed to be on break now, you've got no business interfering in our conversation. Plus, I'm trying to sell the town to this nice man.

Hmm? No, not literally, it's far too expensive. No, if you're not going to take my... you know... thing, then you may as well stay here for a while. Here, in this town, it is as if you are immortal. You can live here for ages and not spend any money. Of course, I don't recommend it, but people here are charitable enough for you to make a living. You can do something that you love - you could write, you could make music - I think there's a music shop in the next town over, so you could perform at the little festival that we've got coming up later this spring. 'Woodchop', they've called it - haha. It's quite small, but if you perform, everyone will know you pretty quickly. News spreads faster than sound ever could, even in this town.

I feel I'm getting ahead of myself. I should take a step back and take you round the town after you've finished your muffin. Do you want anything else? You sure? Alright then. They're good, aren't they - I'll take the muffled noises as a yes then. It's quite interesting how they aren't soggy like manufactured muffins, quite the opposite actually, they're taut, if you can use that word to describe a muffin.

Logging has always been this town's thing, and the local produce thing was a side venture for a few individuals back when the town started, but now it's much more prevalent. They only cut down the planted trees over the other side of town - you see, the settlers who came here a century ago planted trees for the purpose of keeping the settlement alive for years to come. Little did they know about the falling steel prices and the relative availability of transport that would happen in the next fifty years or so. It's strange to see metals go from being rare, mainly because of their difficulty of extraction, to the most common thing in the world. Having large amounts of complex metal things in houses wouldn't have been dreamt of back when they settled here. Oh, the name? It's based on the river valley on which it sits, the Fox River, and the main occupation of most of the original settlers - Foxwood.

There aren't any foxes in the area, at the very least I haven't seen any. Makes you wonder why the entire river and the area around it is the Fox River valley. You would have thought that the people who found these places would have thought 'hey, there might be places along this hundred mile river that aren't populated by foxes'. Maybe the average area around the river has a fox or two living in it. Perhaps they'd be justified through data, but that's not how the original naming was justified. A lot of people before me have named things after short-lived ideas and concepts, there's never any future-proofing in the way people name things - and it seems like the easiest thing to learn from. But I'm no clairvoyant. I can't tell who will be on the right side of history, and I don't think anyone can really. For example, the whole Jim Crow thing, and the laws. Only five, six years ago were they repealed now, and so much has changed, but what will happen next? I don't claim to know. I don't think there are any injustices

which are still unfixed, nothing that I've seen before, like slavery or feudalism, those things were wrong. It seems like we might stagnate, to be honest.

Thinking about it, I only mean stagnating socially. I'm being cynical again. No, with social movements, that's all done and done, you know, next thing is we might have coloureds on the moon. Who knows. We've got a launch coming up later on, in the summer. Did you watch Apollo 14's landing? No?

Why?

Why didn't you watch it? You had work to do. What work? That's right, investing. Investing. Invest your time into watching the future of humanity. The Apollo programme pulled six hundred million viewers for its first landing, right - second landing? Yep. You're right. Nothing. Nothing compared to the first one. Because you were bored. You people were bored.

I say 'you people' to try and distance myself from humanity. I'd love for someone to come and take this power away from me, save me from permanent emotional ruin, but at the same time, imagine if I stayed alive for thirty more years. Imagine if I did! I might be able to die on the moon. Sometimes, while working under a Lord, or Baron, and being almost illiterate, you have to wonder what life would be like elsewhere, and where elsewhere is more extreme than the moon! It was like an earth of your own, you could be your own Prometheus, you could make fire, and then make shelter, and all sorts of things. Of course, now we know the moon isn't like that. It's barren, inhospitable and impossible to live in without looking like a deep sea diver. I saw the footage from the moon expecting an ounce of colour, even inferred colour from variations in the black and white film. No. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Rocky, almost like a static sea, littered with nothing.

But yes - back to not watching those landings - when I was told of the Wright Brothers' flights, I felt awful for missing such an event. Of course, there was nothing I could do, I didn't have the money

necessary to make my way over to America. Plus, there were no planes - except the one I wanted to see!

I don't remember the first thing I witnessed that truly shook me. I think there's a natural limit to how many things you can remember. Perhaps, if you don't want to take this power, I will one day look back on the period of time I have lived up until now, and I will see it as a blip. A bump in the road. An inconsequential ripple compared to the tidal wave of tomorrow. I wouldn't want to deprive anyone else of the feeling of watching technologies develop so far. I wouldn't want to take away that feeling of awe. Yet, I can only give it to one person, and remove myself from a future that I felt I was supposed to experience. Of course, as the past weighs down on my mind more and more, I will likely change my mind, and I already have done to a degree by inviting you here, by letting you see the inner workings of my life, and how things work when time is no longer a factor in how long you live.

Do you want anything else before we go? Perhaps one of the smoked salmon sandwiches which they do. They're amazing - as I said, we won a prize for how well we did in one of those contests. Unfortunately, we don't have enough milk spare at the moment to make cream cheese. Robert told me his dad's trying to get more cows so this won't be an issue. But, the lack of choice has led everyone to experiment with putting different things on their salmon sandwiches. And yes, they are sandwiches, the baker hasn't made bagels this week. Over there, on the wall next to the till, you might be able to see the bakery rota.

It's quite funny, no one comes here on Thursday mornings to pick up raisin bread, yet he still bakes it like clockwork. None of it goes to waste, to my knowledge, he either eats it or throws it out the back for the animals to eat. Something tells me that the animals hate raisin bread too, haha. I think you should try some, I'll just nab some from behind the counter, he won't mind. I think he'll be happy that someone is actually trying some.

Ah, that chunk looks weird now, he might be angry if the display doesn't look great. Tell you what, have the whole loaf, I'll leave a few dollars for the food and the bread. Maybe we'll have it with dinner tonight; it's probably going to be soup. Oh, no, you don't have to pay for anything. It's on me.

Door's still a bit stuck. It's not too hard to imagine a world where all doors work perfectly. Given unlimited time, you could fix every door. That is, unless they make more doors, which is, to put it plainly, very likely. People want houses, right. They eat that land right up. It's quite interesting seeing the odd article about the warming of the earth in newspapers that get left around. Yes, I'd sit around on a Sunday and read the newspapers from the whole week, front to back, top to bottom, just to see what was going on in the world. I have to say, I'm glad I kicked that habit. So much useless information, or worse, misinformation, in those papers.

Without sounding too pretentious, I've read almost all major work in both literature and philosophy, too. The lot. Although, that was a few decades ago. I've let it lapse recently. Left here, up to the town hall. Can't miss it. The roads here were cobblestone until very recently. I think most of the cobbles were from a local mine, there's one over the other side of the river a few dozen miles down the road. Yeah, so if you haven't read all that stuff, prepare to be able to spend as much time doing what you want.

Are you part of any social groups which could hamper your ability to go off the grid for a while? Or alternatively, would it be feasible for you to disappear when you started to not age? Just wondering about the logistics of the issue. You know, it wasn't as easy to get away with this kind of thing when I was a peasant. People would try and kill you, right, because you'd lived too long, and you'd been in one community for far too long, and when they tried to kill you, you wouldn't die, so they'd say you were a witch and banish you - or try and burn you. Fortunately, I was only beaten up a little bit when I moved from hamlet to hamlet, attempting to earn a living. I dread to think what state I would be in if I was charred like those witches.

Modern society's attempts to recreate the magic (or lack thereof) of a witch-burning amuse me every time. Every time a historian writes about one of these things, they don't realise the people who wrote in their little diaries only did so because they were rich and removed from the reality of the situation. What I'm getting at is that those pyres were less bonfire and more spit roast. Those peasant friends of mine used to eat mouldy bread until we saw ghosts (which, I figured out, turned out to be the hallucinogenic mould ergot) and go to one of these things slammed out of their brains.

It's a human desire to get drunk and do stupid things. Even if you haven't felt the urge to do it in person, you've at least, like, imagined what it's like, right? Did you go to university? Where? Oh, alright then, well was your fraternity into hazing people? I assure you they were. Maybe you weren't at a cool enough fraternity then. I suppose not all people have this urge, and some want to go out and do much stronger things. It's not a good idea when you have to worry about how your body is going to function fifty years down the line - but for me, despite my lack of consequence, have abstained for the most part.

I saw a drunk and angry teen in the late 30s, he crashed his car head on into oncoming traffic after a breakup. Cars back then didn't have as much crumple as they do now - the spot where he was was entirely packed together, seat folded against the dashboard, pinned to his bonnet by the twisted metal behind him. Not that there was much left to pin down - the sight of it put me right off any sort of drink. The girl who left him spoke to me the next day, before she knew he had died; she was concerned for him, she wondered how he was doing, she wanted to 'maybe give things another go', and that this was just a 'minor thing, he's the love of my life'.

I decided to not tell her that he had decided to kill himself the previous evening, driving in downtown Dallas. But, in the end it didn't matter - one of my friends broke the news to her, and she looked into the distance, walked out of the room, hopped in her Duisenberg, and drove to the same intersection he had gone to, and on her first go around, she managed to hit a car, head on. The first car crash had

made small news locally, and word of mouth was mostly confined to Knox. When the full story came out, with the second crash, my friends and I were pulled in for an interview (very much against my will, I had no identification at all) and we explained their relationship. Headline news all over the state.

If they hadn't been together, and they both crashed their cars on purpose at roughly the same time, nothing would have happened. No state news. No local news. Nothing. Just a statistical anomaly for some historian scanning over old newspapers to vaguely correlate, and then move on to the next inane topic. You see, that taught me that life is not about what you do. You can toil your entire life, working on a great masterpiece of fiction, and stay shut indoors, never seeing anyone. If no one sees your book, even after you die, was it ever written at all? Life is about the connections between things. Relationships, patterns, language - that's a Wittgenstein thing, I believe - it's all connections. I might be wrong, I've never been the strongest on linguistic philosophy. Anyway.

Neither of those people were perfect, he did have a drinking problem, and she was manipulative, even though it took me a year after her death to see her anything other than perfect. We never connected the dots between her otherwise perfect physical health and her need for 'prescribed' morphine. We never connected the little marks on her arm to anything else she did - that is to say, anything she did, no matter how dangerous or silly, everything she did was *ipso facto* cool. I hope that no one should have to follow people who do such things in the future. They shouldn't- I shouldn't have taken a literal back seat to this problem, refusing to guide the course of her life because we thought that the slightly-too-drunk boyfriend was the real problem. We started thinking about why this would have happened, and my friends and I came to the conclusion that she drove him to drink, not the other way round. The others, who had known him since his parents moved to Dallas back in the early 20s, said that he had drunk before when he was fourteen, maybe fifteen years old, but he didn't like how he became, so he swore it off. At the time, they said they thought it was to get more money from his father. They

thought the oil money would flow into his pockets so long as he didn't drink, and as long as they didn't have to go sober, they were fine with using his nice cars and other things he had that they didn't. Prohibition was really only for the poor, thinking about it.

As soon as 1933 rolled around, the poor guy had already met the girl, and the ban on alcohol being lifted gave him a new lease of life. Didn't do his liver any good, though. I had a little theory of my own; he didn't drink because his dad had made money through some dodgy means, and he was frightened that if he was arrested for drinking, his dad would be put in jail as well, and they'd have their money taken away. I never did get to see the end of that whole saga, though, by the time that both suicides had happened, I had lived in Dallas for 5 years, and it was taking its toll on me. The amount of people was unlike what I was used to before, I had only lived in rural England for the majority of my life - that was hundreds of years ago, though. Crazy to think that my accent changed so quickly. I seem to pick them up really fast. I'm scared to go on a normal holiday because I might be incomprehensible by the time I get back. I say normal, because the majority of my holidays are just walking for weeks, if not months at a time.

Well, anyway, I started walking after both suicides had happened. I told my friends I had been drafted because I was part English - the second part was true, at least in some sense. I walked the length of the country, and all the people I met seemed happy enough to see me, not that I knew anyone, it just seemed that the spirits of the average person had been lifted by the success in the war. Picked up some books, no matter how heavy it got, I held on to my favourites, trading them as I kept on going. After buying a small wooden cart, I became a moving library of sorts, and well after the war was over, I settled down in Idaho, in this small town called Challis at the foothills of the Rockies, and with the newfound knowledge and money I had earned by selling books, I started up a bookstore. Didn't have to register any kind of tax, or ID, nothing of the sort. I was a charity of sorts, I had no need for money above the running costs to keep the walls from collapsing.

It was a good run in Challis. You see, it's a lot bigger than Foxwood, probably about four or five times the size, so there's not as much connection between the people who live there. For the decade I was there, the town stagnated in its population, and slowly, people began to move out, some to larger cities elsewhere in the state, some to more rural areas, and some because of the nuclear testing which affected the area far worse than any of the surrounding areas. Of course, whether or not that actually had any effect remains to be seen, but I'm not a skeptic about these sorts of things. Either way, I ended up giving the shop to the town for a sizeable sum of money, and I took some copies of my favourite books and walked north once more. I considered trying to trace out the entire coast of Canada, but it was too remote and cold to be worth seeing. A million square miles of rocky terrain. Almost reminds me of the moon, but with water. And more hills.

Walking alongside the up and coming construction of the Interstate 15, I came across another small town, Conrad, MT. There, I met the love of my life, who now rests somewhere else - that headstone doesn't really rest on her body, no, that would be odd. Her ashes were scattered, by the way. Couple of places. I knew her from 1957 to 1967. Ten years that seemed more meaningful than any other that I have lived. Oh, and I set up another bookstore with her in Conrad, and there, I was told I was a clear and precise reader by some parents after they picked their children up from a reading group we had organised. I got better and better at it, and then one day, a young boy challenged me to read the newly-released 'Green Eggs and Ham' as fast as I could. So I did. A week of practice went by, and I showed that kid what I could do - and you know what? I'm glad I went out of my way to do that. I would have been content in my own little selfish way if I had just stayed in and sat through Middlemarch or something like that. But I read that book with more care and attention than any I had read before, not trying to read into it (as so many people claim to have done), no, I was merely trying to inspire this kid to read himself. He could be like me. I realised my talent was quite unusual when

Helen - I should have mentioned her name before, I'm sorry, it's just my lack of ability to deal with... I'm fine when I talk about it, but as soon as I use her name, she isn't just a figure in the distance. Anyway, back to what matters.

She tried to read as fast as I could, but it took her months to even get to where I had got in a few hours. The Independent-Observer picked me up, and the story was 'cute' and 'marketable' enough to make it onto the Billings Gazette. And then, as it happened, the Guinness World Records people wanted to have a look at what I could do. There were a few other people, maybe three at most, competing for this title and other associated reading things, but as soon as I turned up, it was clear that no one else was on my level, so to say. I spent the afternoon walking around the halls of their building, finding my way to the recording room, keeping anyone from asking what my identification was or anything to do with that. I recognised a picture of a man, hanging on the wall. It was that guy who I had given the idea for the book. Now, I'm sure he's richer than me, but that doesn't matter any more. I thought, 'he started a company who's legacy has outlived him'.

But he wasn't there to experience it. For me, that was the important part of life up until recently, being there was much more important than having a lot of money or something similar. It's like as if immortality is really priceless. Sometimes I wonder why I'd even think of giving it away.

Back to the story - I won, I collected the award, walked out of their office block, and my wife drove home on the second most wonderful evening I have ever laid my eyes upon. I read Green Eggs and Ham in our Crosley on the way back from Helena (after which she had told me she had been named, her parents visited the so-called 'big city' before they had her) and I remember her laughing at my intonation, every syllable had been thought over hundreds of times, but usually they were skipped through so quickly that they became a blur, like the events in my life which had led up to this point. Now, going at less than eighty words per minute (a lethargic pace for anyone) I had no

choice but to think about each word, its placement within the sentence, its meaning, how it related to the other words, the rhyme, why things rhyme, why words are, the etymology of each segment of every word, it was all visible to me, right then.

As I neared the end, my voice grew stronger, more confident in itself, more confident that now would be the time to give up this business of constantly moving and I called out - nearly bellowing - 'Thank you, Sam-I-Am!', Helen laughed so hard she could barely concentrate, tears streaming down the side of her face, and pulled the car to a stop at the side of that same highway I had found my way to her all those years ago, the I-15. Right then, in the winter of 1960, we decided we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together, however hard that would be for me to achieve in practice.

To Here Knows When

Can't you see those little intricate glass panels above the doorway? Those prove it's a proper art deco building, no matter how many redecorations we go through. They still need to fix the doors on this place - they open fine, but they let lots of air in. That, or invest in some draft excluders. I don't see why they can't spend what little money they aren't throwing away on heating bills. Even in little towns like this, there's bureaucracy. Lots and lots of it. And if we're lucky, we might get to see some of it in progress behind these very doors.

That bald guy up there, see him? That's the foreman. He does have a name - Greg. Greg Hall. He's no James Bond, that's for sure - haha. So, right now, I think the panel are debating whether or not to install a new statue of Martin Berkhoff, war veteran and one of the figureheads of life in Foxwood. It's an interesting debate, I think. Take a seat and listen, I'm sure the people at the front don't mind us. That lady I just waved to - Kelley Hall. Brother and sister run the town council. Who says monarchy is dying? Haha.

In all seriousness, Greg and Kelley are nice people. I've had dinner with them a good few times now. They're good people. Honest, and Kelley's got a kid - she moved back in with Greg after a divorce, and they live almost like they're a married couple. Just without the romance. You'd hope. Anyway, back to Berkhoff, the statue guy. So, he's born in 1887, goes over to Europe for a metalworking job in the early 1910s, and then war breaks out, he finds the nearest army recruitment post and signs himself up to war. I don't think not being home by Christmas really bothered him, I think. He came back to the United States after the war, but they didn't want him - he had served abroad for too long, and he hadn't got any identification. So, much like me, he walked, and despite being mortal, made his way up here (there was no interstate to walk beside, either) and began working at a lumber mill. Allegedly, he was quiet, but he built about half of the houses here, and most of them still stand today. They're the good

ones. The first one he built is the one I live in - far from perfect, but if someone told you to build a log cabin and you did that well on your first try, that'd be pretty damn good, right?

Berkhoff got this town on the map - quite literally. He had a daughter who became a cartographer by her mid-twenties. Martin was an unstoppable force, kept working, making metal frames for houses, working down at the mine across the river, smelting his own metal, barefoot. He made the town safer, he made barriers for the roads which winded up the mountain, he made railings for the elderly, he made steps, ramps, ladders, treehouses that are still dotted around the place - admittedly, a few of them have rotted and had to be taken down, but the rings of screws and nails that stick out of these trees is still a touching legacy. Shame he isn't around to keep them from rotting.

Around 1940, he went back to Europe to fight in World War II, seemingly of his own will, and he returned in '45, battle-scarred, but still working hard. His daughter moved out in that time, but she still came back to see him when her job permitted, and boy, was that a whole lot. She learned all of his tricks and things that he said. She was a floral girl, a girl who was likely the envy of everyone around her. Of course, there was still a problem with being like this, she attracted a lot of people who were jealous of her, who wanted to be like her, who wanted to be able to pull off wearing the latest fashion and the oldest hand-me-down clothes, to be adept with both the needle and the hammer and nail. Martin was still very reserved, but he came to every town hall meeting, much like this one.

He was driving his truck down the pass to visit the mine, when a patch of black ice caused him to lose control, and he broke through the barrier he had built, the only reason why it couldn't take the force is because he was overloaded, stacked high with sheet metals (only lightly secured, mind you) that provided the necessary momentum. The sheets had been given to him as a sort of Christmas present from the mine, you see, he had recently built and plumbed in a functional outhouse, which emptied out into the river and took in water from elsewhere. According to some autopsy, he was pinned under the

rubble but still alive for days, and died not of injuries or suffocation, but starvation. In the days after the accident, not a single person had passed through that road - the mine was shut for a week before the new year. January 2nd, 1947. That was when they found him. It was put on his grave, despite it likely not being his actual date of death.

His daughter was questioned about him, there were interviews, rumours that it was intentional, but everything seemed to point to an accident. The black ice on the road was still there, it seemed obvious. During an open day (which she had organised in order to sell his house so she could move out of town) people realised it wasn't so clear cut about Martin. So, when they entered his house, everything looked normal, right, everything was well. She was talking to everyone, being beautiful and trying to sell the house on her own merits, when some overly-curious buyers found a hatch under a bearskin rug they had picked up. She was in a different room, she couldn't have heard the metal clang of the panel as it bumped against a cupboard that Martin had made himself. There was a ladder, it was a small, almost cosy room down there.

Inside was a stash of all sorts of nazi paraphernalia, flags, armbands, medals, badges, all displayed not with the intent of portraying them like artefacts in a museum, but with openable doors on the boxes, like they were supposed to be taken out and played with - like toys! Diaries, full of quick scribbles in poorly understood fragments of German, about his nickname 'The Silent General', his disappearance after he was summoned to court in Geneva, all hidden from everyone, under lock and key, harbouring views that...

You see where this is going. Greg was trained as an apprentice by Martin, and became known as Big Berkhoff for a while - he used to be a bit more well-rounded before Kelley returned. So, when Miss Berkhoff heard the cries of disbelief from some locals who wanted to move into this idyllic cottage, right on the prime spot of land at the top of Foxwood, she was appalled, but it was clear that she wasn't surprised. And I don't blame her for not telling anyone. Of course, the contents of the room were taken away, despite her wishes to keep a single diary.

The house was bought, it still stands today, unused, unfinished renovation still marking the exterior. She moved out almost a year after her father had died, right after Christmas, and she moved to a little town in Montana.

Conrad. She moved to Conrad.

Yep, that was really her. She didn't mention anything about this to me until 1963, when we had been married for three years, living above our bookstore. We were talking about having kids, and the topic of conversation of her father came up - she had never talked about it before, but I had always respected the bounds of that part of our relationship. I had always thought she had been abused or mentally scarred, and she didn't want to talk about it for fear of invoking some horrible memory. Turns out I was half-right, haha, she just had a horrible memory. Or, a good memory tarnished by time.

Is it better to have a happy but false set of memories, or a gritty, realistic, depressing set of ones? It's hard to tell. I tried to answer this question a few times. We saved up a bunch of cash from the previous two years, and went away to climb in the Rockies for a few days. Just a few days before we left, one of my friends in Conrad, a writer who had moved in from a different town, and he talked about this thing that the CIA were doing that involved a sort of mind-control drug. You probably know it as LSD now, but then, pretty much no one knew it. Well, no one that I knew, at the least. He gave me some - how he got it, I still don't know - and I took it with us when we went to the hotel. He gave me some advice on the logistics, but it ended up not really mattering at all. I put a few little drops of stuff in some food I had cooked for us, and I sat on the balcony - I didn't remember to tell her she had taken any - but it didn't matter. After a while I just... *got it*, and I remember she said something along the lines of 'isn't this the most beautiful sunset you've ever seen?'

It was. We went back indoors and fell asleep in each others arms, fingers tingling with every shuffle of the light in our room. Neither of

us had any dreams that night - it didn't matter, we had lived one. She woke up and said 'I was really tired last night. We didn't do much, did we?'

I said, 'Not really, no. What did you think of the sunset?' She looked at me, and jumped back on to the bed. 'Oh, it was only the most beautiful sunset I have ever seen in my entire life. Nothing much.' She kept looking at me, and I thought she was waiting for me to say something - but I don't think she needed anything more than me to look back.

I remember the look on her face, almost disappointment, when she looked outside again, and realised the world wasn't always that beautiful. I could see the nuances in her emotion, the way she despaired for the state of the world but felt powerless to make it any better. Later on that day, after a day of almost wordless walking, she asked me if I wanted to have kids - a seemingly off the cuff remark, the same tone used as if she had asked me if she needed to pick up eggs at the grocery store. I said yes. I said she needed to pick up eggs on the way back to Conrad, too.

Greg! Oh, how are you doing? Oh, that's great. You've lost even more weight, right? Brilliant. Going on one of those runs? Haha, I'd love to run it with you one day - of course, I'd be walking! Haha, yes, yes, everything's fine with me. All good down South Cabin, as usual, right. I'm just showing this man around the town - he might be moving in soon! At least, if we're not too cultish and creepy around him - save the child sacrifice for Thursday, Greg! Oh, and uh... how's Richie? Haven't seen him in a week or so - oh, he's started first grade now? Good for him. Well, shan't keep you any more, I've got a tour to give. Yeah, see you tomorrow. Say hi to him for me! Haha... sure, someday... bye now!

Going back to the topic of memories, Helen still thought that that sunset was the best sunset she had ever seen up until her passing. I never wanted to tell her that such a pivotal moment in our relationship was based on some stupid whim. Some drugs I had given

her in a moment of 'experimentation'. But you know what - it also did some other good to her. She seemed less burdened by the world, as shown by her willingness to up sticks and move back to Foxwood, in order to provide a more homely environment for a child - I asked what was wrong with Conrad, and eventually, we decided to move once the question had rolled around our minds for far too long - awkwardly so. We sold the bookstore to the parents of the child who I had done the 'Green Eggs and Ham' thing for, they said they were indebted to me as he couldn't read before he met me. We said our goodbyes and moved on up to Foxwood, she picked out a modern house near the centre of the village, I think we'll probably walk past it when we leave this place. Actually, considering the meeting is over now, why don't we go around the town now? Oh, I think they turned the bookstore into a library eventually. It's a lovely building. I did go back and see it at some point.

The door's a push door. It doesn't make sense, it's got a handle to pull it outwards. I didn't design it. Can't remember who did - anyway - I'll walk you over to the house we bought with our own money. Her mother had recently come into her life after finding out about Martin through some news story about a Nazi living in Canada. It was kind of sad, watching them meet, the only real interaction they had was to pass over an inheritance sum which was courteously figured out by them, no fights, no hassle, weirdly cold and unfeeling. Watching them was like watching an accountant and her boss, there wasn't much crying, in fact I probably felt more emotional than she did.

We received a handsome sum, partly due to the fact that Helen was now pregnant, and her mother felt that in her absence, more money than was really necessary would grant the child a grandmother-by-proxy. I made a joke about making an effigy of her out of hundred dollar bills, but it didn't go down very well. It's not like I was going to burn it or anything. I suppose effigies have a negative connotation. Voodoo things, and the like.

A briefcase was handed over - kind of like in an action movie, and she left, and I haven't heard from her since. Rachel Berkhoff, born

Rachel Thompson, and now changed back to Thompson after she heard the news of her husband, found once more in the worst possible way. She explained to me that she felt emotionally disconnected from her mother, and had no father now, so she felt somewhat alone in the world, despite her late-stage pregnancy. Now, I was worried that something would happen at the birth, I would figure out it wasn't my child, all these thoughts echoed through my head - I had to shake it regularly to get these sort of... *voices*... to stop talking. That's not a good, is it? Every time we drove, we sat in relative silence, looking down the road attentively for patches of ice, even during the summer. The winter came, however, and the baby was due. Now, from here, there are two routes which end up in roughly the same area, but are entirely different. One road is a larger, flatter, safer, but more congested road, and the other is a... well it's the road that goes down to the mine. By this point, operations at the mine were busy - so much, in fact, that they built a bridge in the early 60s. Leading up to that bridge is a stone pillar with a square cut out of the front, and next to it, a blank slab of marble, waiting to be carved. It never ended up being carved, and the stone is now gone. I'm sure that it was going to be called the Martin Berkhoff Memorial Bridge at one point, considering the town planning meeting that caused it being filed under 'MBMB' in some filing cabinet. By the way, I used to do filing for the town hall. I don't any more.

So, the time comes to go to the hospital to have Helen's baby, and I want to get in the car and drive down the flat road out of Foxwood, I think it's going to be clear because it's Sunday evening. She insists that it will be busy, and that we should take the slippery road instead. So we take the slippery road, I don't want to argue with her right now. So we travel down the quiet lanes, I'm trying to drive as fast as I can, she's yelling at me to go faster, and we come to the bend where her father drove off the road, and she shouts at me to go faster - and you know what - I honestly didn't care about it. I could have driven straight off that cliff - I wouldn't have died, I could have got out of the wreckage, I would have healed in time. I would have gotten away with it.

But I didn't. I slammed on the brakes. Momentary anger wouldn't live with me for just a lifetime, it would last much longer than that. At that point, I wanted to stop the car, get out, and just give up my immortality then and there. Right then. I did stop the car, we faced the barriers, the place where the metal wasn't as rusty, the hole her father had made was patched over by someone who knew how to do his job half as well as he did. She hit my shoulder - why did you stop?

I don't remember knowing if she was already crying when she looked out at the barrier, or if she started crying afterwards. Main thing is, she was crying.

We stopped for a few minutes, silent. She asked me to start the car again, she'd head back to Foxwood and call a doctor. Our car barely made it up the icy hill - we'd missed out on buying a new car to pay for some bills, you see, so the old station wagon was our only method of transport. We made it back to the town, and called a doctor, who made it down here in a matter of minutes - the roads were clear after all. Of course, I didn't mention that, she was just glad that the doctor was here quickly. Oh, it's... it's on the right here, down this alley, we're heading to the garden. So we're in the house - that one that backs out onto this garden - and everything is fine. That's it. Everything is fine. We have a little gathering the next day, you see - we've got a kid, a baby boy, Alfie. Greg turns up, and he brings his sister, that girl Kelley who I said hello to, she's just come back from her divorce, she's not crying, but she's sad. Greg is drinking from our liquor cupboard, he's living it up, he's communicating at the same level as our newborn, while she's in a corner, sulking. She doesn't know anyone from Foxwood, only Greg.

So she tries her hardest to fit in, she talks about Alfie with the others, and tries to fit in stories of Richie when she can - nobody's interested, she sits back down, I go and talk to her. She seems annoyed, but only vaguely, like something has wronged her a long time ago - of course, at this moment, Greg hadn't introduced me to her, he was far too busy playing with my son's stuffed teddy which Helen had bought to give to him. Kelley sat there, right, and she just

moped. She told me about her 'abusive' partner - personally, I don't think he was abusive, I think they were both awful people back then, but it's not all bad. When she's around Greg, she's a lot nicer. That is, to everyone but me. I have no idea *what* I have done to piss her off, I really don't, I just can't explain why she is angry at me, and it almost makes me want to go over there and... give her a... a stern talking to. I don't know. It would be worth risking the police threat - after all, she would likely say I assaulted her, even if I said she was a 'petty bitch' over the phone.

I haven't ever done any of those things, but the bounds have been firmly set. Awkward glances between her and Helen and I seemed to give her the air of vindictiveness that could only end in some kind of harm. And I'm pretty sure that she did something.

Alright, so here's the garden, there's our old house right there. Quite a cosy little alcove, right? It's wonderful, I know. Used to love the place. Still have a key - it really shouldn't matter whether I do or don't, I just don't want anyone to use this place anymore.

1967, January 19th. That's why I don't want anyone to use this place any more. Three days before my son's third birthday, right, it's a cold day, very very cold day, you see, so we sleep downstairs, all the windows closed, everything tightly closed, and we have a fire running - no central heating, of course, we couldn't afford it. I wake up in the middle of the night, I go to get my flashlight and think 'wow, surprised that the little guy hasn't woken up yet, it's crazy, he's usually up three or four times a night.' I turn the flashlight on, and I see the room is filled with smoke. Thick smoke. Black. Can't see my hand. Try and put the fire out, and there's all sorts of things in there I didn't put there. Bits of wood that I definitely don't remember putting there. I look up the chimney after the smoke cleared, and it's black.

Then it hits me.

I threw open windows, I opened doors, I picked them both up and put them down onto the porch, I called 911, I picked up a piece of wood

and smashed it against the fireplace, I took the fire poker and hit it against the wall, it bounced off, I almost caught it, I threw it through the back window, I took the open window and kicked the frame out, I ran around inside fanning the air out, I went back outside, and they were still dead. Still dead. I hit one of the wooden porch supports, columns, whatever, and it broke. Some snow fell off the top. I waded further outside, and fell into a snowdrift. The snow was frozen in parts, great icy sheets of suffocation. I hit the porch top, and the sheets slid off neatly, taking my insatiable anger and disappointment away from me for a fraction of a second - and for me, a second is even more meaningless than it is to normal people, and in that moment I wished I could die too, I didn't want to have to live like this, and I waited outside in the cold, half dressed, with my wife and child laying there, still in the same blankets they laid in inside, not a minute ago - or less, in fact. Time had slowed down - right down, you see. Right down. I'm such an idiot, I felt like such an idiot.

Don't worry about that window, it's been replaced a few times now, but I like to keep it broken. It's not like its heated any more, no one lives there, there's no central heating, there's no reason to live in a house where people died.

And you know what the worst thing about this whole thing was? I was taken in by the police when they came to collect the bodies. Police car and an ambulance. I had to sit there and answer questions with a straight face while trying not to cry the hardest that I had ever cried. They were talking to me as if I was as old as my son! Telling me tips on how to not do this again - big deal, man! I don't have a chance to do this again! I don't have a chance to find someone else! They were talking to me like I was one of their children, in a sort of comforting tone, but in a way that made me think about what I did wrong. Perhaps it wasn't what they said, but the way they said it. But right then, about then, is when I realised that I'm no more experienced in these... these moments that we all have to go through at some point. After all of my years of seeing people be burned at the stake and die in wars, nothing prepared me for something like this. I

suppose it's because since up until then, I hadn't been that close to anyone. Perhaps, a long time ago, and then I thought back to hundreds of years ago, and some tiny fragment of a memory came back to me. I think I'd felt like this before. I think, hundreds of years ago, there was another person who made me feel like this. And I took another look at the blue lights outside, and the people carrying my wife and child out to the ambulance, and I wondered about when I'd forget this moment. Some day, I would be so far away from this moment that I wouldn't be able to pinpoint the loss that I just felt. And I didn't want that to happen. I didn't want to get over this. I didn't want to learn anything.

And I think that's when I decided that I didn't want immortality anymore. I didn't want to have to go through this again, I didn't want her to become a smudged and misremembered blotch on my brain. You know, I could walk away from this whole thing, right, and go and live in the woods somewhere, or go somewhere else, maybe London, Dallas again, I don't know. Anywhere else. Nothing was stopping me. But when I thought those thoughts, I realised I was acting like I was mortal. I acted as if I had finite time, because even with infinite time, you only have a finite amount of time with anyone else, and so it's not like you have infinite time at all, no quite the opposite, you've got loads of finite times, so many that they blur together but fracture apart, the good times mix and form some kind of haze, but the bad times stick out, they're the things that cause you to have to move, they're the things which you have to watch out for.

If you want infinite time, if it's just that you're after, then go and sit in front of your television and stay there. You'll feel fine. You can sit there as long as you like, and nothing will happen. There's nothing bad to remember, yet nothing good either. You have to try and do things, to make your time worth having. That's the only difference. And now, having accumulated enough horrible experiences to make a regular person insane, I wish to give this power to someone else. And that day, January 19th, I wished for nothing else.

Yes, it has been quite a few years since then, and no, you're not the first. You probably won't be the last, either. I've had hundreds come

my way, they've found out about me through some kind of folklore, they call me - hence the new answering machine - and then I schedule an appointment with them. Some of the locals are sick and tired of me taking people like you around this town, they push me further and further out with each subsequent foreigner that gets to hear about all their horrible secrets, and for that I resent them. I just want to get rid of this thing. For some, some of the time, it is a blessing. Now, it's a curse. So, I have now told you everything you need to know about this whole system of being. Yes, there are earlier tales, but do you really care about how many turnips I farmed and how many plagues I avoided? How I worked in India? No? Thought so. We'll walk back, and you'll tell me what you want from immortality, then.

What You Want

What do I want... that's a tough one. Before I start, are we heading straight back, or is there anything in the town you want to show me? Are we heading through the house- yes, yes, alright then. It's quite cold in-

Yes, I know you already said that. You like it cold in there, right? Saves on the heating bill, right? Only have to chop wood, that's all. I could never do that. Well, yes, I know I might have to, but I might not have to. Plus, if I become immortal, then I shouldn't need heat. Oh, do you? How badly? Well, I mean, you are wearing a jacket, that's not exactly a great-

Alright. Sure. Has it been cleaned or altered since... That's quite some dedication. Ah, right, what I want from immortality. Alright. So, I'm now 55, and nearing divorce, two children, and I feel that if I only have the last twenty years of my life remaining, then that's it, right? What do I have left to live for? Nothing. If I split up, my life will be squandered, if I don't it'll be hell.

Yes, I heard about you from a friend, but he's in a much better place than I was, and I felt that he thought that the 'curse' aspect of this whole thing would get him into more trouble than the 'immortality' part. Well, yes - I know they're the same thing, but I honestly don't feel that I care that much. You want the door closed? I'll shut it anyway.

Anyway, so this guy said he didn't want to be immortal after talking to you, he said you talked him out of it. Why? Why'd you think of doing that? You say you want to get rid of it badly, but you hold on to it instead of just giving it away to anyone who walks past. I mean, at

least one of the people who you talked to would have loved the ability to not die - how many people did you say you talked to?

So then there's a pretty low chance of me wanting to take your offer up. But you know what, that makes me more interested, it seems interesting how you could accumulate so many stories and people's lives, it's just cool. It seems cool, at the very least- well yes, now I understand quite well that maybe 'cool' isn't the best way to describe it, yes I realised that a while back. I said it because I wanted to get my thoughts out there, because otherwise I would have nothing to say.

So, have there been any people that have been suitable for immortality, and have gone through with this whole thing, but then you said no, because you didn't think they were the right person? No? So, let me get this straight - every *single* person who has ever been offered immortality has denied it? But why? Not one of them? Were any of them felons, or mentally deranged? Oh yeah? What was he in for, then?

Ah, okay. And he came and saw you because he had... yeah, left prison on parole after a couple of decades, and I assume he wanted some more time to replace the parts of it he had lost. Yes. Sounds about right. No, I'd like immortality so I can free myself from the constraint of a fork in my proverbial road, where both ways look as if they are going to be a dead end. There is pretty much no escape to this, as I have told you.

The problems with my wife started years ago, when she tried to put me in a position of guilt over causing her affair. Well, to be fair, I wasn't being very proactive in our relationship. Yes. It's not exactly balanced, you don't satisfy me, so I go and cheat on you while we had a child - at that point we only had one, but soon after, I was a bit too proactive in our relationship, and essentially struck another nail firmly into my coffin.

Nails are cold, hard things. I compared my children to nails just then because it makes sense in context. She has almost weaponised them against me to make me feel even worse about even mis-stepping

once after her gross overstepping of what anyone would consider kind. She was an adulterer, and a manipulative little person.

It's hard to explain. The kids are cold and unfeeling towards me because she is. They're both girls - and I was told one time by a friend (on an entirely unrelated note) that the thing that brings two people closest together is a mutual hatred of a third party. In a way, they're almost ideal daughters, they don't fight, they're well behaved, but I almost feel that is only because my wife tells them I will do awful things to them if they step out of line. And I never have. I have never done anything to them. Not a single hand has been laid on them to do anything other than console, and yet they still react to me with the same kind of wide-eyed obedience one might expect from a trained dog. Yet, I have rung no bell. I am not a metaphorical Pavlov, with a bell in one hand and a belt in the other.

She's using them against me. I know it. Whenever I go away for business trips - which isn't that often - they always greet me with a slightly less and less enthusiastic hug. Of course, the oldest one is almost twelve now, maybe it's a teenage thing, I think sometimes. But what about if she tells me something I'm not prepared for? I can't begin to respond to any of their hard questions or statements merely because I am the hard question. I'm waiting for the day where one of them says something like, 'Dad, why does mom say you're going to kill her?' and I have to explain in the nicest possible way that their mother is a master of psychological manipulation, and you are just a pawn to her! *She doesn't love you!*

I would have to wipe the tears from her eyes, and then - oh, then - a ruckus would be caused. There would be running up the stairs, there would be the knocking over of side-tables - which I know she was claim to be 'not on purpose', but on further inspection of the table's contents and general stability, determined to be intentional - there would be an air of sweetness about both of them, my daughter in her childish grace, tears probably still flowing, and my wife trying to console her, out of breath from tipping the side-table over and running up the stairs. She would nestle her head in her arm - which

one, it matters not - and begin to console her, not with the motherly love that is to be expected by a young girl, but a sort of horrendous veneer of charm, like wood print above a cheap cork shell.

You know very well if you hit the veneer hard enough, it will break. But in doing so, you will become the monster that she says you are.

There is no escape, my little girl is now locked in, she doesn't know it and she doesn't try to retreat, she pushes her head further over the shoulder, tears now fully off the face, staining her lovely shirt (which you will inevitably get blamed for) and the arm grips harder and harder around a thinner and thinner waist. There is no retreat. She can only stop crying once she is let go of, not the other way, like you would expect. There is a button on her side that she can keep hold of, like an operator's hatch of sorts, and she can turn the intensity up with, maybe, an exaggeration of emotions - 'Don't worry darling, daddy's just going to go to the garage now.' - my den.

Yes, she sends me to the garage. I don't have any real say in the issue, surprisingly. I almost tend to go there of my own accord now. It's quite a nice setup. I have a TV that is linked to a patchwork of cable, and a heater for the winter and a fan - although broken - for the summer. It is nice being in there sometimes. I don't feel as if she has any control over me there, it is the room that dad gets sent to if he has been awful. And dad is awful a whole lot.

There doesn't seem to be a whole lot of things going on for me, not at all. Not even in general in the... in the vaguest way. I apologise if I'm going a little incoherent. But I am stuck in a job which, while not being the worst job I could have possibly hoped for, is several ranks below what I thought I would end up doing. To be honest, if I had seen myself where I am now twenty years ago, I would have come to you then. Of course, if you were available then.

Well, I would have come to you earlier than what I have done right now, obviously, it seems pointless to postpone it if I knew you were around. Well, perhaps things weren't as bad then as they are now, I might have been able to fix things myself back then - of course, now,

it's different. Things have changed. With every promotion, it seems that Nixon implements some stingy policy that holds the money back.

I live in a three bedroom house, which wouldn't be so bad if one of the bedrooms wasn't used for 'storage' - she loves her Christmas ornaments - and as a result of this very deliberate decision, I have to sleep in the garage when I'm not wanted in the bedroom. Which is a lot. A lot of the time, the kids sleep with her for whatever reason, and their beds are far too small for me to sleep in - not that I would want to, I'd risk being berated for being a paedophile. Oh, yes, she has said that, in her defence, though, it was only once.

I hadn't really done anything. She demanded that she always - and I mean always - get the kids dressed and ready for school, but she was quite ill. I didn't want the kids to get sick, so I left her asleep in her bed and went to get them ready. She gets up, she notices that I'm in their room, and Abigail is running around, no clothes on, and she runs in, asks me to make her a cup of coffee, and I leave, but not before asking her if she's okay. She says 'I'm fine', nose practically dripping with snot, and I go out of the room, the door slams behind me. The kids go off to school, everything's okay, and I come back upstairs with the coffee, expecting her to be back in her bed, but no, she's up and about, doing things, I ask her if she's really feeling okay. She didn't respond.

Later on, I come back from work, the kids are asleep, it's late, she's still sick, and she sits me down. She places a polaroid camera on the table, the one I bought for her birthday. She looks at me with a grave stare, almost as if she is frightened to talk to me. I know this look, she usually wants to get something off of me, or ask me for some more money. But no, she gets some polaroids out of her top pocket, and places them down on the table, under her hands. I think that maybe this might be some kind of third pregnancy announcement, or some kind of pet she bought - after all, she had done things like this in the past.

She raises her hand, and it's a picture of Abby in her bedroom, you could see where Ares has her hand over the edge of the camera. There are a few more, they broke a few of them, black prints that seem to

reflect how my wife is looking at me now, and she then flicks through about ten more photographs, and then there's one of Ares, on her bed, with no clothes on, facing upwards. The picture is well taken, I can only assume there was a lot of detail, she assumes only I could have done this. She looks at me, and asks me, her voice inches away from tearing up, 'Did you take this?'

I look at her with disbelief first, and then genuine concern. I say I didn't. She says I did, it's like no other image in the stack, the flash is turned off, the subject - as she so lovingly put it - is perfectly in frame, everything about the photo seems as if it was taken by someone who knew what they were doing - adding to that, the image is developed perfectly. She uses this against me, despite the fact I know the model of camera we bought crushes the little chemical packet thing before the photo even leaves the camera. Still don't know why she told them that they needed to shake the photos - that's probably why most of them came out bad. Either way, she's still angry at me, but not like before, she's looking at me as if I'm going to beat her senseless for 'finding this out', her eye twitches as if it has seen a thousand angry fists launched right at it, she thinks I am going to kill her.

I get down from my stool at the kitchen counter, and I walk over to her, and she flinches, she tries to get off her stool, the stool begins to tip, I put my hand out to try and stop her from falling off - it's too late. She smacks her face on the countertop. The worst possible place. She gets a black eye. Even before she does, I know she's going to have a black eye, she's going to hang it over my head. Another self-imposed garage visit was in order. She took the photos back to our room, I wasn't able to find them.

In the middle of the night, the Abby starts yelling. She has a temperature, and she's woken up to find that Ares has vomited over the carpet. So much for 'I'm fine'.

It's almost disappointing, this life, I don't ask for too much. She's taken what I have away from me, the kids feel as removed as they could be without legal action being taken on their behalf. I just don't think that life, at least how it's going right now, is worth living any

more. Not to say I'm contemplating suicide, but it has crossed my mind more than a few times at this point. I'm not ashamed to admit that, either. I have had suicidal thoughts due to all of this. What do you mean by that? There's no way that most people who come here do. Alright, I believe you.

If some people come here in a state worse than mine, then what about the people who just want more life? That's quite harsh. Well, I suppose you'd have to be nice to them so they didn't think they were *unworthy* or something like that, haha. So who's the most well-off client you've had?

Hey, that's my boss. Yeah, did he say anything about the company? How he's just given himself a massive bonus. Yeah, we're talking a ridiculous amount. Oh, really? Did he really lie about his life just to get a chance to talk with you? That's incredible. Incredibly selfish to want something as strong, as powerful as *immortality*, and getting said immortality through a blatant lie. His life is fine, I know that's true. I went over to his house when he hired me at the firm, years back. A mansion of sorts, it truly was amazing. Colonnades. Balconies. Turrets. Still remember the damn thing all these years down the line - and sometimes I think there are parts of the house which aren't secured. Hahaha - I mean, I could probably break in to one side of the house and just live there, they probably wouldn't notice for a very long time. Even if they did call the police, it'd take ages for them to get to me and find me.

Yes, that is a joke. My commute doesn't take me past his place any more, he moved. I don't see the old house at all unless I'm going to visit my mother, who lives quite close by. It's not as big as his, no! It's a two up, two down, townhouse kind of thing, it's a New Orleans style - for whatever reason - but I think she likes it because she lived in New Orleans up until fairly recently, I suppose she needed something to remind her of her past. Of course, as you said, reading all those articles about memory loss with old age makes me sad, but also happy at the same time. When her memory degrades a little - who knows, it might not at all - but if it does, then the New Orleans balconies will

mean everything to her - they're one of the defining features of the city, you know?

I remember walking along the a pier at one point - actually, it wasn't a pier, it was a marina, some kind of newly built boat dock, too, right on the south side of the city, right down where all those little... spiky bits are on any map you see of the place. My mother drove me in her car all the way down to the edge of there. Up until then, I had spent all my time going further inland, or up the Mississippi to visit friends and family. She didn't know where she was going, either, she was constantly checking the road ahead just to see if there was still road - a lot of that area is swampland, you know - and we just kept going and going. She eventually stopped to let me sit on her lap and hold the steering wheel, nice, straight, smooth lanes going past more and more fishermen who took time out of their days to give us directions, or ward us off certain areas. One of them took kindly to us, and gave my mother a little box of trout. They were obviously the ones which he didn't intend to sell at the market later that day, but we were more than happy to have some food for free. Driving further and further down to the end, the road became less and less defined, eventually going from asphalt to dirt, and then to nothing.

We got out of the car, checked that the box was still right-side up, and then she picked me up, and put me down on the hood of the car. It was very warm, but not unpleasantly so - the weather was that sort of muggy calmness. She always said that it came before better weather, but to me, that kind of weather was perfect itself. I think she thought her hair looked better in the breeze, haha. She walked back to the back of the car and dragged the family camera out, and then walked to the front of the car, and some kind gentleman walked over and asked us if we wanted to both be in the picture. We obliged - or should I say, my mother obliged. I was far too busy keeping my shorts from melting on the bonnet. The man didn't know how to work the camera, but, as we later found out, the picture came out just fine. I don't have it with me, but if I could, I'd show you.

One of the best things about that image is how pointless it is - yes, I do mean that in the most normal sense. We spent an entire day

getting out there, packing food, packing what we could to drink, some other amenities lest I get bored along the way, and not to mention the gas to get us there. It was just the two of us, my father was at work, and it was before school really started for me. And yet, I remember it very well. But it's pointless. We spent a whole day achieving nothing, if you think about it objectively. Anyway, the reason of me telling you this little story is to explain that moments like those are what I want from life, but life is far, far too short to have many of those life defining moments. Maybe not life defining as such, perhaps a better phrase would be memorable memories. Yeah, there are different... different levels of memory that are immediately identifiable as soon as you create the memory - you just know that witnessing your daughter leave for school on the bus for the very first time is going to be one of those moments that you treasure forever. But you don't think about it at the time. Well, for me it would be. Would have been. Oh, she didn't wake me up - I was in-between jobs and didn't have an alarm clock. I asked her about it later, and she said she didn't want to wake me up, because I get crabby. Yeah, it's like every day was the same for her.

Regardless, you understand how there are different levels of memories? Classic ones, good and bad, and those ones which you only remember because you said you were going to remember them? When I was in the car with my mom, driving back into New Orleans, I thought to myself, perhaps for the first time ever, 'I must remember this moment.' Don't really know why, to be perfectly honest, but I still do. The redness of the paint, the flakiness of the edges of the interior panels, the broken dials on the dashboard, and perhaps most of all, the camera on my lap, the photo stuck to the dashboard, too high up for me to reach.

Oh yeah, there are a lot of these kinds of memories. I remember all sorts of menial things from the past. Standing next to a sofa in my parent's room. Ugly as all hell. And despite the fact that I remember the room very well, there are no memories of me doing anything inside the room apart from standing next to the sofa! It's just bizarre. I just want to be able to remember those things for a longer period of time. Perhaps without the fear of a horrible separation and a lonely

life until death, I might be free to go and do a few more interesting - or uninteresting - memorable things.

So, the way I see it, I have two choices. Stay with Mara until I die, and risk this... sadness - it's unfixable, our relationship, and the second option is to try and separate from her. If she gets the kids, they'll be fine, but they won't have a great time and they will resent me forever - and why should I be forced to accept that? There is technically a third option, but it's not really an '*option*', it's more like a chance at something. If the court, somehow, in some way, decides to give me custody, then I can live the rest of my life as normal. 'Normal', of course, is a hard thing to define for me. Any improvement whatsoever in my quality of life would be considered 'not normal' for me. I'm used to the downward spiral.

But there is a little... quirk about this plan. The girls. I know they think she's much better than I am, they must think she's trying to protect them from the belt-wielding, chain-smoking, day-drinking, bumbling idiot she thinks I am. Maybe she think I'll become that at one point - and boy is she doing everything in her power to make it that way. I suppose I could go and pick up a six pack of beer, and when I'm done drinking it, I could go and watch the midday news, a round or two of golf, and then smash the remaining bottles over her head. This is how I think she thinks of me.

This is why I don't want to be constrained by death, it's like the last twenty or thirty years of my life don't have enough wiggle room. It's like when I was born, I was fired out of a cannon, but a long-barrelled one. I'm not going anywhere apart from where I've been fired. A long, long journey to somewhere not even worth going. And I'll probably miss, too, somehow.

In a way, it's ironic that I want to spend my life going on long, long journeys to remote places that aren't even very picturesque. I want to relive the wonder of standing right at the mouth of the Mississippi, but on my own terms. You see, I wouldn't mind the situation I am in now if I wasn't locked in by kids, or marriage. Well, nowadays, marriage doesn't mean much, especially not to her. I sometimes think

that even if I went back there, by myself, the fact that I've grown up and seen more of the world, maybe I wouldn't think it would be as good. I don't think the charm would still be there. There are probably a lot more tall buildings now.

Why didn't I divorce her after the affair? I wanted Abigail to have a normal life. I thought I could pull it together, smile for the next forty years, and be a good father. And I've done all of those things in the worst conditions possible, I feel. I didn't want little Abby - a baby at the time - to waltz through life with a woman I honestly didn't think capable of raising a child. Yeah, I said it. I always wanted her for her, not to have lots of kids. She would tear herself apart trying to care for them, I thought. And in a funny way, I guess she has. She's just torn me up instead of herself.

She was a secretary when I met her, a lovely girl, and we fell in love slowly, as I walked in day by day, the greetings went from awkward glances to friendly hellos, to organising meetings together - aside from the ones she already had to organise. She was never very good at organising meetings, but she always found the time to talk to me, slotting in the fragments of conversation in-between her empty phone calls, redirecting callers to the various offices in the building we worked at.

It was a hive of activity, and she was my queen - but no one else's. She was so nice to me because I was nice to her, I sat back and watched business professionals who I begrudgingly respected immediately lose any respect by shouting at this poor woman for not arranging their lives for them like children. In hindsight, she wasn't great at what she did and I'm sure she deserved to be complained at a little bit, but the way in which these people did it seemed to be counterproductive to any work she was doing. Every time this guy, Alan Welch, had anything to say to her at all, he'd turn it in to a proper life lesson, he'd shout at her until people on their phones in the offices thought there was some kind of problem with the line.

Once, I stepped in. This was the start of it all - my boss had failed to get to a meeting because she didn't call his mobile while he was out

for lunch with another client. He came back in, ranting to his colleague about not being able to claim food as a company expenditure, and then he took one look at her and said, 'You were supposed to call me!'

She said that she had tried to call the restaurant he said he was going to be at, but they were too busy with tables being reserved. She had been calling the wrong restaurant, I later figured out, but he didn't know that and now he was wasting even more of his so-called 'precious' time bullying this girl. Eventually, the shouting was over, his legs stiff from leaning over the desk, he waddled over to the elevator and the attendant had already pulled it open, scared to somehow mess up opening the door and having him launch into another time-wasting rant. The elevator failed to move after he closed the gate, and it got stuck shut. He then spent twenty minutes inside the elevator by himself, screaming for it to be opened, only being granted his wish when some guys from maintenance came down and sawed through a part of the shutter. It's almost ironic, seeing that he had refused to upgrade to the automatic elevators you see nowadays. He had made that decision on his own, free from the so called constraints of the board of governors. And now, the board of governors was waiting upstairs for him. I walked into the other lift and waited for him near the meeting room - I was on break and so I nonchalantly loitered with my cup of coffee.

He ran to the door, and then opened it like nothing was wrong. I didn't hear much before it slammed shut. Right about then was when I had my first doubts about the whole company, and it turns out that more than the governors were there. Some representatives from the IRS were there too, and they seemed quite happy. But not in the 'you're all good, thanks' kind of way, a sort of 'we've got a big one, boys' kind of way. Real sinister. I was almost glad.

Punched out late that day, and Mara told me she was thinking about leaving the company too, which was nice to hear. We decided to save on money so we could try and start our own shop at the edge of New Orleans, and I was thinking we could set up some kind of market

where fishermen could come and sell their things to not only regular buyers, but tourists.

I once saw a New Yorker buy a pound of fresh tuna for something like... five, perhaps maybe ten dollars. I realised how much of a killing we could make if we did something like that! And how much it would help those kind people down at the south side of the city. You know, the ones that gave my mother that box of fish all those years ago. Since I could drive, I drove down there by myself and bought fish there for cheap. Factoring in the price of gas, all in all it wasn't that much cheaper to go and buy it from them, and if I valued my time, I certainly wouldn't have done it. But somehow, it was worth it, building up a bond with the people who lived and worked there, slowly getting the prices lower and lower - though that was never the ultimate goal. I was worried that they'd offer me fish for free - then I'd be locked in to only taking as much as they gave me each week, like a charity.

So, a few months after the screaming incident, we moved in together in a house in Belle Chasse, about 1942 at this point - neither of us was heading off to war at any point, though it was scary to imagine going. I was never much for fighting, and I don't think the recruiters thought I was either. So I stayed in Belle Chasse for the war, and we built up some kind of a fishing market, it was never too profitable, but the income kept us going through the years, and we just stayed there, happy with a routine but changing life - it was never like being in a cubicle. I never would have dreamed of going back into there if I had had the choice. Unfortunately, I did end up back there after we had to sell our small house there, and move (at her mother's request) all the way up the country, right to upstate New York. What about the long and harsh winters and mild summers she found enticing I will never know. All I know is that we found our way there, eventually. Of course, we didn't do it by walking a wagon full of our possessions up the country, haha. How was that? Actually, how long do you think it would have taken you to do it in one go? That's... wait, you've done this before. You did? Honestly, at this point I'm not surprised. You could tell me anything and I'd believe you.

Which way is it back to the cafe? Might want to pick up some stuff for later. Really? So, when do they open? Alright. We'll go tomorrow morning, okay? This bread is really nice. So, as I was saying, I had moved to upstate New York, in this little town called Newark, and it was so far removed from the life we had lived before. It was just so different. We had a larger house there, not far from her mother's - but far from my mother's, at this point. I hadn't seen much of her mother at any point, she seemed disconnected from her in some way, but when we started going over to visit her more regularly I saw something that I think about to this day. A picture frame of what I thought was a good image of the two of us at our wedding had been covered over. Covered over! My side of the picture replaced with another picture of her. Her hand holds nothing in that picture now.

It seems superficial, to be honest, but for me this is a fitting metaphor for how she became. Her mother was sly, but friendly on the outside. I could see the tension between them, she thought, 'why'd you marry this guy?' In fact, she didn't just think that. She said that. But that's besides the point. Her mother was like her in every way, and now that Mara's looks were becoming a smaller and smaller portion of the reason why I loved her, she became her mother.

Instilling doubt about other people seems to be a family trait for them. I think they're inherently mistrusting people, they have some kind of... lack of empathy. Unfortunately, I more than make up for that - not that that's an achievement, I'm not a massively empathetic person, but these people didn't seem to care for others.

A long time ago, we went to a little diner just north of the city, I ordered some fries and a burger with a shake, as did she, and we sat in a booth together. We sat and talked for ages, despite the fact we'd been together for years at this point, we talked about the fish market and how that was going, and we got up to drive back to Belle Chasse, and she dropped her shake cup on the floor. Glass cup, mind you. It shatters. She dumps her tray back at the counter and just walks out, she doesn't stay behind and even try to clean anything up, she just walks right out of the place.

The worst thing about that is I followed her. I followed her for the next twenty years of my life, and look where that got me. I'm here, begging for an extension to a life which I no longer feel is mine. I shouldn't have to be reduced to asking for 'more time', I feel pathetic.

I suppose this feeling of being pathetic is deep rooted in me, but not due to any bullying or social issues or anything like that. Some really innocent activity, sitting on your bed, could turn into this feeling that you're not doing enough, but you stay on the bed, it's warm outside and even warmer inside. Lying on my bed in the middle of the day is probably a larger metaphor for my life, too, I don't have purpose, I never moved with any kind of purpose, floating through life like I was on a bed on that hot summer day, not making the most of the world outside.

Oh, the fish market? So, round about, uhh, '52, '53, that kind of time, the fish market did well because of the fact there wasn't much competition. We were the first to really organise these people, to give them a central thing to go to. Over time, though, they got richer and richer and started selling fish at the more prestigious markets. Allegedly, some of them even gotten places to work at at the big department stores that had opened in Algiers. Lovely places, they were. But, we stayed in Belle Chasse, despite the fact it was a little further out of town. We weren't making a whole lot of money, enough to keep us in business though, and the amount of time we spent with the fishermen more than made up for the lack of money. You know, not being able to go on holiday isn't that big of a deal when you have plenty of people to keep you company, both where you work, and where you live. I mean, it didn't really matter in the end. Everything was just pretty much fine, to be perfectly honest, there wasn't anything to be done outside of just being there. Turn up to work, help people set up their stands, collect some money, go home or stay and socialise for a while. Perhaps, sort out some quarrels over prices sometimes, maybe even chip in and do a little bit of salesman work for a stand. Yeah, that's the kind of stuff I was doing with the previous company I worked for, sales and things like that. It's not like it was the

same kind of thing, trying to haggle a bunch of burly guys down to the lowest we could was more of a sport than a job, and it usually ended well for us. It really wasn't the same as sitting in a cubicle and doing marketing things, this was like free-range sales, if you know what I mean. Out in the wild. And, somewhat like a newly uncaged tiger, you don't want to give up that freedom once you've got it. You don't feel any sympathy for the circus trainer who beat you, really - if you get the metaphor. Well, I thought you might not have got used to all the phrases and sentences we use nowadays. Considering how my grandpa says all sorts of weird stuff, it's a surprise that you seem to have taken up all sorts of modern words.

I should hope that I would be like that if I was immortal. There's a large part of me that thinks I would just try and hold on to the present forever if I was immortal, and here I am, being allowed to try. Not 'allowed' as such, but, you know. I suppose you can't really try immortality for a little while, right? And you don't know how the, uh, the transfer process works, either. No.

As for holding on to the past and present, well there's a lot I have done in the past to do such things. In my opinion, you can tell when you've peaked by looking at what times you think about the most fondly. Maybe you have more freedom now, maybe you're richer now, but you might look back on your school years in a very positive light. If you spend your whole life trying to get back to how things were, then that's it. Your life is over, to a degree, you're going to spend infinite amounts of time working towards nothing. Perhaps, one day, we'll be able to use machines or implanted brains to relive our memories again - perhaps I'm reliving them right now. In that case, it's very unlikely I took the immortality.

Yeah, ok, I *am* veering off topic, but it has something to do with the fish market. You see, as soon as she decided she wanted to move up the country, that was it. In the month or so before she even told we might be moving, she became reserved and quiet, she no longer wanted to see our friends and family, she was acting fickle and didn't come to work sometimes, she didn't help set up, and if anything in the

house broke, she just left it broken, our side tables accumulated dust and broken bits of ceramic mugs, and all sorts of extra things. All of our stuff just went uncleaned, unprepared for a few months, and when she told me she wanted to move house, that was it, no seeing people, I was working on - ironically - making the house as nice as possible in order to sell it, painting all the walls, cleaning the roof, she even bought various bits of glassware and mirrors to make the rooms look bigger, we worked for ages, knowing that we were going to have to sell the business too. Admittedly, we got a lot more money than we would have thought; that may have been due to the fact we sold it to those same fishermen which we were friends with, they all chipped in and bought it from us, and that was nice to see the business stay in the hands of people we knew could run it well. The smell of the fish was the last thing to leave the house, after everything we owned was packed into boxes and hauled across the country on a few trains - and let me tell you, if there's one branch of the US that doesn't get funded enough, it's the railroads. Every thanksgiving, instead of driving over, some of my relatives would visit us in New Orleans, they'd always arrive a few hours late. It got to the point where they started banking on there being delays in their journeys, and one time, they had assumed that the snow up near Seattle would kill their train - but it didn't! They got here a day early. An entire day!

Anyway, some of the stuff that we took out of the house arrived a couple of hours after we got there by car, and I'm pretty sure we're still waiting on a furniture set that she bought. Maybe it arrived, but she threw it out. I don't know. We have so many different sets of things that I can't keep track of them any more, the sets get mixed up sometimes. Why we buy sets over individual chairs, I have no idea, they usually come in sets of 6, but there's only 4 of us in the house. So the setting of the table is always an awkward thing for us, she sets all 6 chairs out, which means we're usually in the centre, with the two end chairs going unused. But, every time I cook, she sits at one of the end chairs, she claims it's 'more comfortable', just because we don't use them as much. I move them around sometimes, just to see if she can tell the difference.

She can't. So, if she's sitting at the end, the two girls sit next to her, and that leaves me to awkwardly sit facing no one. Now, I get that you're probably thinking - well, yes, ok, so it's a small thing. This, on its own, would be a minor quirk, something to dismiss as a little flaw, something to love and embrace even - I mean, imagine trying to put a positive spin on this. I could put on a robe and we could sit at opposite ends of the table. No, like a king! You know, like a dining hall? Haha, you've probably seen one of those before... No? So you were a peasant the whole time? Well, you'll have to tell me about that over dinner, I'd just like to finish venting before I lose my train of thought.

We could play a game - like, that one where you blow a paper ball across the table with a straw! I saw it in a magazine I picked up once, and it seemed like a good idea for a rainy day. Unfortunately for me, most, if not all days in that household are rainy days. Every day is spent going through the same old garbage, the girls do what they want, she goes for a walk to 'clear her mind'. Not that there's anything there to clean. I mean, nothing has gotten dirty there, unlike the house, right. So you know with the whole moving fiasco; cleaning fell out of her normal routine, and so when we got this brand new home - and it was like a show home, mind you - it just slowly fell apart over time. The routine of her going to work fell apart too, and that was one of the saddest parts of it all, she just lost her momentum in the world.

When I met her first, she was outgoing, bright, she had a group of friends which she had known since before she went to school, and they all lived in the same area of New Orleans - I'm pretty sure they didn't amount to much, most of them just lived with their parents until they got their inheritance, at least that's what I heard from... um, where was I...

Oh, the first time I met her. Yeah, outgoing, all that. She was beautiful, and still is, I don't have to squint to see the woman I used to love. Mara is beautiful. It's true. But I don't have a picture of her in my wallet or anything, I don't have a picture of either of the girls either. It's just something I've never felt the need to do. Not in any way. But, yeah, Mara, she's very good looking, and I think she uses that against

me. I'm not the best looking guy, but I assure you I looked a lot better twenty odd years ago.

So, she was socially responsible, she wasn't a risk-taker by any means but she knew when to have fun, she knew when to have a good time. Seemingly ideal, right? I don't know about that any more. You know, rose tinted glasses and all. I mean, if you asked me to tell you the happiest time of my life, I would probably blurt out 'oh, right after I met Mara', but if you sent me home and told me to write a three page paper about my the happiest time I ever had, I would probably arrive at my college days. Yeah, it's not a normal response for people to have, but I actually enjoyed high school. I mean, I was far from perfect as a person, I loved where I stood socially though. So, you've got your basic jocks and the quiet ones, right? Well, I didn't really fit into either of those categories - hard to define and all that. Right, so the jocks, they like sports and stuff, and I'm pretty good at sports, I get along with them, I own a motorcycle, always have done, I rock up with a leather jacket sometimes (when my dad wasn't going to use it in the middle of the summer) and underneath those mirrored shades I was sweating like a pig. I wasn't nervous or anything, maybe a little, but that wasn't the problem. So, I talk to them, say goodbye, and head back to my neighbourhood on my bike. On my way home, I decide to stop by my old friend Tom's house, he's a bit of a shy guy, right, and so I go in there, and he's with all of his friends, and they're playing a board game, and I say 'hi', sit down and join in, and I've seen this kind of thing before. It's not one of those easy ones, even Monopoly is easy in comparison to this one, and I've struggled with that before. So, I'm about an hour in, we're seemingly no closer to finishing than we were to begin with, and I'm losing track of my game, I'm not focusing any more. Eventually, I lose all interest, but not out of lack of interest for the game, it's that I don't feel I can keep up with them all the time. I'm still wearing the leather jacket, the sunglasses at the side of the board. Tom's mother - maybe it was his grandmother, I don't know - came in and gave us all some orange juice. It was homemade, and it was pretty nice for the most part, so I stayed until I finished that. The

sunglasses caught the sunset coming in through the only un-shuttered window in the room.

So I picked them up, said goodbye, went home, called one of the other motorbike guys and we went around the neighbourhood for a while, having a chat in-between, leaning over from bike to bike. One of them's just got this new metal baseball bat, nice and heavy, and so I assume someone else has brought a baseball or two so we can head down to the park and do something there. I mean, it's not like my initial intentions were innocent, I assumed we might spend the evening hitting fruit out of trees or attempting to break bottles lined up against a wall.

So I ask who has the baseball, and they all laugh at me, and I get kind of confused, but maybe there's some kind of inside joke I'm missing out on. Thankfully, I think my delivery of the line was jokey enough to make them think it wasn't genuine. And this guy, Marlin, baseball bat in hand, sitting on the back of my bike, and we're going down one of the roads in our neighbourhood, he's shouting directions at me over the two-stroke noise, but I'm not paying that much attention. Most of the houses in that area looked pretty much the same, it's like a suburban purgatory, all you can see are just tacky new builds. So he's bellowing directions, and I'm just looking up at the sky, happy to be out with friends.

And all of a sudden there's this old lady screaming at us from the kerb. I didn't hear anything she said, thankfully. But what I did hear was an almighty crack as Marlin smashed open a mailbox with his baseball bat, and some laughing. I suppose it was kind of funny, and I sort of laughed. I don't think he heard me. We get to the park, and we go around for a while longer, hanging around aimlessly for ages.

I get to class the next day, sit through a bunch of boring whatever, and then lunchtime arrives, and I have to make a choice. Tom or Marlin - of course, there were other people in these groups, but I've known both of these people for about the same amount of time, so which one do I pick? Which one do I go and sit next to? If I go with Marlin, then the others might not realise I'm gone, but they might see me on that table and somehow resent me. And the other way round is

true as well, it doesn't seem as if Marlin wouldn't bully me if I went to go and sit with Tom. So I go and sit by myself, and wait for other people to come and sit near me.

They didn't. Later on in the day, after math class, I spoke to Tom about a homework which we had to do for tomorrow, and he said that I was welcome to come over to his house and work on it together so we could get it done quicker. I took him on the back of my bike - only after a great deal of convincing - and he directed me to his house. It felt a lot like the previous evening, his voice barely audible over the slightly less loud sound of the engine (we were going slower, but I'm sure he still thought it was too fast) and we arrived at his dime-a-dozen place, and I noticed that the mailbox was taped up, it had been smashed down to the ground. It was at that moment I realised that Marlin had done that, it was my fault that this had happened. I took my jacket off before I got inside, and the sunglasses too, I put them in a small compartment on my bike. I went inside, and the... grandmother - I still can't remember - offered us orange juice yet again, she looked at me with a smile, but I knew that I was the reason she had had to tape that mailbox back together. Yesterday, she was out on that street, yelling at us. I felt like I had to hide away somehow.

We finished the homework pretty quickly, but Tom said he wanted to come out for another ride, and I obliged. I couldn't believe he enjoyed it after saying 'no' to it for such a long time, and so obviously I was excited too. His grandmother let him go, not reluctantly, but we could tell she wanted us to stay to have some of her cooking. I said I'd be back for dinner - somehow, she had assumed I was staying until much later - but that wasn't my main concern. I just wanted to take Tom around town and show him what kind of fun he could have doing this stuff, and he didn't just need to sit indoors with his friends to have fun. I mentioned the room earlier, I think, it was stacked high with board games and junk, and almost all the windows were boarded up, not by choice, but just covered in posters for stuff like old alien flicks. Weird stuff, but if you got a little bit of light in the room it'd be somewhat presentable.

Anyway, he's on the back of my bike, and he asks if we can go a little faster. I oblige, we're going at half the normal speed I would be going at - no matter how good at physics this guy was, though, he didn't seem to understand that if we went slower the bike would become less stable. That didn't matter, we were picking up speed, and just cruising around the neighbourhood. I asked him if he wanted to go anywhere else, as a gesture, and he said he wanted to go over to the park, which I obliged. I didn't know that Marlin and the others would be there, and I knew even less that they'd have a whole party-looking thing set up right there. I don't think there were any laws against that kind of thing anyway, so I wasn't angry to begin with. I circled round the park once, and then twice, and then Tom adjusted his sunglasses once more and he noticed one of the guys there, don't remember which one.

He, not knowing what this would cause, shouted out 'Hey! You're that guy who goes round the neighbourhood smashing up those mailboxes!' Marlin shouted out something in return, and threw a beer bottle towards us. It missed, but it shattered on the ground just in front of the bike, and we must have gotten a puncture somehow! I mean, it wasn't like all those shards of glass stopped moving when they hit the ground. Eventually, we rolled to a stop, and they came running over, and I got off my bike and began pushing it, Tom slipped off at some point and started running in the other direction, I didn't notice him at first. They're all running towards him now, and I see Marlin peel off the main group to come check up on whoever he thought was carrying this kid around. He looked at me and said, 'Wait, that was his house we smashed up?'

There was a look of remorse in his eyes, but I'm pretty sure he was trying his best to hide it. So, you see, he had the same bike as me, bar a few modifications. He walked my bike over to the gathering they had, and I looked over my shoulder, the others were running back, having failed to catch Tom, somehow, and then he said 'Here's my bike. You ride it home, I thought you were some rando. Where'd you live anyway?'

I told him I lived further downtown, not in the suburbs, and he said he'd see me later. what he meant by that, I had no idea, but when I got to school the next day, my bike was there, he'd fixed it for me, a gesture of good will, and so I joined him for lunch. We sat at the end of the table and talked about one of the college football games that was happening in a few days, his older brother was a real good football player, and still is, I think. Either way, something that Tom and his friends wouldn't be interested in in the slightest, right. They'd rather sit and do whatever they liked doing, which, in the grand scheme of things, was going to be as likely to lead to a career as the wild dreams of most of the football players at that high school. But that didn't stop Marlin from inviting him over. Tom didn't seem interested at first, but then Marlin said there was a strategical, technical aspect of the game that he would be a lot better at than most of the other guys who played that. I vouched for Tom - not really knowing his strategical skills.

Eventually, Tom got in to football - not so much playing it, but talking about it, and other people seemed to take notice of this, and soon enough, some people from the school actually came up to him and asked him to do something for the school's team, just to see if there was any merit to having a coach that cared about something other than running in vaguely straight lines and banging into things.

Nothing came of it, Tom was too reserved to try and do this stuff, and it seemed like such a shame, because he really enjoyed analysing the games, but didn't care to apply all of this stuff, it just didn't appeal to him. Every single time we went to lunch, which was arguably the most social time of the day, Marlin edged closer and closer to Tom's edge of the table, and he sometimes asked what kind of games they were playing. Sometimes, I kind of felt like Jesus, sitting in the middle of a long cafeteria table, with the jocks on one side and the board game players on the other. Tom and Marlin had the occasional awkward chat, but they just couldn't communicate - which was only made worse by the fact that Marlin really enjoyed making these board games for himself, some of the time you could see him down in the wood shop, turning pieces for whatever game he could, sometimes

chess, sometimes Monopoly, whatever he found interesting. The actual gameplay wasn't the main thing for him. And, despite these small differences, they just couldn't talk about anything very deeply, but they kept coming back to try and talk. It was almost infuriating to watch. Everyone else was just staying to their self-assigned seats, it was maddening. These people really weren't all that different, and Tom and Marlin weren't setting a great example - but they were setting a precedent.

So then, one day, after we went around the suburbs again, Marlin noticed that the mailbox at Tom's house was still barely taped together, almost slumped over from the weight of letters inside, and he told me that we should probably go to the junkyard to see if we could find anything worth salvaging, I was kind of confused at first. He found some sheet metal somewhere, and we managed to fold it a little so it didn't decapitate us on the way home. I dropped him off at his house, and he said he'd almost finished working on this new exhaust for his dad's Indian, which was impressive. Most of the time, you would see him sneaking into the back of a shop class to try and use the schools equipment, which was unreasonably good for a public school. I think one of the PTA leaders had connections to the guys at the workshop that was attached to the junkyard. A good will gesture, or maybe some kind of donation was involved, I don't know. Either way, I watched him through the window, working on making a new mailbox, all from bits of metal he had found in that old junkyard, and he polished every single one of those bits to perfection, he cracked open a new bottle of argon just to weld the pole on - much to the shop teacher's anger. It looked amazing, and after about a week and a half of on and off work, we rode over to Tom's house to give him his present. All the while, I'd kept it a secret, I suppose he might have thought we did it. Marlin didn't tell any of his friends either, and so any time they came into the class too, he'd switch the mailbox out for the exhaust. Oh, he really tried to keep it a secret. And it worked, right, it really did, so we went all the way over to Tom's house one evening, right when we knew Tom was going to sleep - some ridiculously early hour, I'm sure - and we stuck that new one right in,

we put the mail in it, and we stuck up the little marker he'd made, and we laughed, and went away.

The next day, Tom came in and he spoke to me about his mailbox being all shiny and 'chrome' as he put it, spouting something like it being like if Cadillac made mailboxes. He seemed pretty damn happy for someone who didn't seem like he got a lot of mail. Anyway, I told him that Marlin and I saw that it was broken, and we fixed it, and that this one wouldn't be able to be beaten in as easily. In fact, I'm sure the reinforcement on that thing would have let it survive a hand grenade put inside it.

I come to school the day after that, and the smile has somewhat worn off Tom, and he tells me that there were a bunch of ambulances outside his house last night, he didn't sleep well since there were police and everything. He got into a little bit of a rant about how they shouldn't have their sirens and flashing lights on late at night, especially when there are no other cars around. I talked him down, and he went about his day as normal, until lunch. Didn't think anything of Tom's story. He's still happy and chirpy, overly talkative despite claiming he was sleep deprived. He still probably got ten hours rest.

Marlin is sitting with me, in the centre of the bench, and the jocks to the left, and Tom's lot to the right. One of Marlin's friends looks visibly angry, which prompts Marlin's questioning. I'm still eating my lunch, when the angry guy slams his fists down on the table. He says 'He died, he died yesterday. Rick's dead. Gone.' Marlin looks amazed, mouth wide open, and the guy follows it up. 'Ain't there anything-*anything* good... in the world?' - a clearly rhetorical question, he sinks his head lower.

Tom, very unusually chirpy, decided to chip in with 'Oh, Marlin made me this new metal mailbox the other day.'

I realised what had just happened, Tom realised what just happened, Marlin realises what's just happened and begins to raise his leg to excuse himself, before the other guy beats him half to death.

I don't mean that lightly. I didn't see Marlin again, his arms weren't... right again, there were rumours that if he broke them

again, they would need to be amputated. I just sat at home for the most part after that, after school. Marlin's friends wanted nothing to do with him or anyone he was associated with. The one attempt at friendship between those groups tore them apart harder than any of them could have wished to do. All because Rick tried to hit that goddamn shiny new metal mailbox with his goddamn shiny new metal bat.

Thankfully, that was right at the end of high school, and most of the people went to different colleges, I ended up going to the middle of the road one, Tom and his friends got good grades and went places, admittedly, mostly libraries, but still fancy libraries, haha.

It just seemed a shame that the best days I ever had around these people was cut short by a semester. It could have been the best summer of our lives, but that accolade would go to the summer prior. Even for Rick.

Is there much longer to go before we get back to the house? I don't think I had enough clothes on, but that's ok.

Ah, that's fine, I don't need that, not if it's only a little while longer. I mean, I get that you could just walk around with a shirt on if you wanted to, but it wouldn't be nice, right? Yes, of course. I don't go around with no clothes on, I'm not from Canada or another cold place, I have no cold tolerance, I'm just a poor New Orleans guy wandering around in the wilderness. You know I've never seen a real cow before. I just haven't. Not up close, at least. Not one of those proper black and white ones. Only the weird looking ones. No photogenic ones.

But Warm Inside

Did you enjoy your little tour of the town? Most people do. In fact, it'd probably be easier to convince people to live here than to take the immortality. Even despite the isolation, a lot of people see more here than they do living in a big city. Maybe you could have a job in some place further south, maybe... Edmonton? Not sure if you'd want to work there all the time, so you could commute there sometimes. Eight hour drive. Perhaps not. Well, you might have all the time in the world, but who would want to do that drive twice a week? I wouldn't. Maybe if I had a really fast car. And there were no cops waiting around.

I've wanted lots of things throughout the years, but the things I think I want for decades, even hundreds of years, they never become the things that I really wanted. Cars, right. Loved them since they were a thing, waited almost forty years to get my hands on one for myself, and it was a bit of a disappointment. But the telephone, that was out of the blue for me, and it didn't seem like that good of an idea to have one, but soon, I wasn't ever off it. Maybe there'll be things in the future that I might like, but I don't know about yet. I think that there is a lot of value to novelty.

As you've got older, have the days seemed to move by faster? That's just something that happens, right? I used to think that, there was some kind of logic to the fact we see our time as relative, each passing day is a smaller portion of your life as a whole. Makes sense, right? Yeah. I don't think that's right any more. I don't think there is any reason for that to be the case. For me, it doesn't seem like time is speeding up any more, it's got to a point, I have my boring days and I have my good days, but what I find helps me keep that time from slipping away is writing a diary. That's also how I remember quite a lot of my more recent stories. I wouldn't remember seeing a woman faint of heat stroke in a bus in downtown Houston, but here I am, memory still fresh. One of the most important things you can do with

this diary, if you write in it enough, it go over what you've done wrong as a form of secret therapy. Subliminal therapy, even, haha. It's great to be able to read over your diary. Not in a self aggrandising, I'm not Oscar Wilde or anything, but I think it's healthy to be able to do this. If you'd like to check out any of my stories since, probably like 1910, they're all there. I tried to write down all the important ones before that, too, there should be one which attempts to show what life was like in the 1600's. I remember thinking I might want to remember a historical moment or two, but believe me when I say kids nowadays know more about peasants and kings than I do now. You just don't remember this stuff for that long, especially when most of it was spent slaving over a fire or tending to crops and animals.

Going back to the time thing, you see, it's felt like the last 60 or so years have been the slowest, most exciting years of my life, and that's because of these new experiences, you see. The thing that I think stops your life from slipping away is to fill that time with new experiences. Ah, before I forget, what do you want for dinner? The soup? What kind, I have chicken or rabbit. Both fresh. Chicken? You sure? Want to try something new?

Oh, you've tried it before? That's nice, where was it. Hold on, let me just get them out to defrost, it's been ages since I last had them. So, where in New Orleans was this 'famous rabbit soup' then? Ok, I see. So, chicken or rabbit? I'll put this back in the fridge then. Want a drink for the time being? That's fine, just asking. Don't worry. They're at the bottom of the door, if you want them.

I sometimes don't eat for a day or two, I can do that kind of thing without worrying about my health much. It's not like I'd go without food entirely, it's far too much fun to forgo. The taste and texture are why I eat food, and I think there's a valuable lesson to be learned from that. How much do humans eat when their physical need to eat is removed? I've never had an obligation to eat, the way my body maintains itself, I don't really know how, but I still much through almost as much food as your average Joe simply because it's a nice thing to do.

I see legions of people all over the United States heading to those fast food outlets you see all across there. Since I haven't been into town in a year or so, I'd be surprised if I didn't see at least two more McDonalds's there. There are hundreds of thousands of people walking into these things every single day, and most of them are eating food because it's cheap, and they think it tastes nice, and for some of them, the 'fast' part of the fast food is why they like it. The fast pace of life has contributed to our reliance on this kind of food for quick rushes of salt and fat, like nicotine. I'm not sold on cigarettes, I've never really understood why people like them. For some people, it works, listening to some weird music with one of those things makes you look cool. Maybe that's only because I've seen that sort of thing on TV.

Anyway, cooking for myself was probably one of the most formative moments of my life; it just seemed like the most natural, intuitive, brilliant thing. Milling flour and getting meals from the town cook was good for a while, but getting into those kitchens was a thing that I don't think many other people got to experience. I remember walking into a modernised kitchen for the first time, electric oven, electric induction hob, electric light even!

Forgive me for rambling on about these kinds of things. It's almost a ritual for me at this point; to go over what I've said before in sterner tones is just part of what I am now. I repeat things that I've said before. Most of the stories which I told you earlier were rehearsed many times before on many other people, and the ones that I haven't mentioned yet are mostly written down in those books over there. It wouldn't be much trouble to get them out and just read something to you. Of course, it wouldn't be as 'authentic' per se, but it might save me the hassle of having to remember all those names. I can't remember where I've changed the names to make them more like modern names, or even to anglicise them. Like the whole tea leaf farming story, that would be a struggle to follow if I wasn't replacing every other word.

Anyway, I'm sure I have more interesting, *you*-specific things to talk about. So, I think I got what you want from immortality, a break from having to act like a normal person under horrible circumstances, and you want the time to be able to get back those lost years? Also, you don't want to die. That's usually the big one. Scared of death?

It's fine, it's human to be scared of death, in whatever form it may take for you. Are you a christian? What denomination - actually, don't worry about that one. Unless there's some really wacky aspect to it. Oh, you're a protestant? Sure, whatever, that's not what I'm worried about right now. Being scared of death is a natural part of life, it's alright to be afraid of 'heading to the unknown country', or whatever Hamlet said. The fear you feel that you won't get enough done during your lifetime is one that most, if not all people feel.

And here's the worst part about it. I still feel that way. I feel that I won't be able to do the things I want for the people I love today because by the time I finish, they'll be dead. You can't ever really live longer than a human lifespan, if no one else does. Everything you hold dear and remember as being recent will slowly be forgotten, people misremember and historians exacerbate. People look forward to the future, sometimes well beyond the point that they will live, towards the mid 21st century. But those same people never feel nostalgic for times that were before them. It seems an odd duality, no one wants to go back to the way things were in Roman times because no one currently alive was alive back then. At least, I assume they are, I don't know if there are any other like me. Even I wasn't around for the Romans, I think. I don't remember if I don't remember.

Ha, like an origin story? I have no idea. No idea whatsoever. I didn't even realise I was immortal, but I was wandering Middle England since I was a teenager, I believe. Town to town, never staying long anywhere. I never thought I would die, and I was right. Lived through all of their plagues, lived through all the fires, too, if there happened to be any fires there. But I never pinned it down to the fact I was immortal. To be honest, for the first fifty or so years of my life, I pinned it on luck. Shouldn't have done that. Might have gotten myself in some trouble for believing there was such a thing as luck, what

with all the Puritans around. The wheel of fortune - A lot of things that seemed innocent would land you in hot water. In fact, just regular water. Drowning was popular. Burning was, too, but it always seemed like there were far more burnings simply because they were way more fun to attend as a spectator. Plenty of lashing around.

It's quite interesting when I get to see people's reaction to that story. If I told them that I went to see an innocent man get executed by electric chair, you wouldn't have the same expression. No, I assure you, if I told you I had witnessed a completely innocent man, who the jury weren't even sure if he had committed murder, if I told you I had seen them be sure *enough* to pull a lever and kill him. Not the same kind of thing. Really, really not the same kind of thing.

People judge my stories on a lot of criteria, and one particularly prevalent one that I've noticed is that they tend to look at things which happened long ago with an air of wonder, which clouds their objectivity. They're fascinated by the fact that a man they can speak to now has witnessed all of these horrible things, but they think, 'Oh, it's okay, they were just old-time people.' Not many people care for the time I tell them when I went to see people guillotined in France. No one seems to object to things that they have no control over - and to an extent, I completely understand. I feel that I have become somewhat desensitised to violence and gore, but perhaps I only feel that way since I haven't seen anything truly horrible in decades. Not to act all 'the olden days were better' with you, but I feel that people today would throw up if they saw anywhere near the kinds of things that I've seen. Perhaps they're more adjusted to seeing all sorts of horrors on TV - well, if I was a mother in this day and age, I might think that the things our children were being exposed to are far, far more damaging than a simple stake-burning.

No, as for the origin of the power, I guess there's not much to add other than the fact I didn't realise it immediately. I mean, most people would go their entire lives not knowing they were immortal - yes, I see the irony in that statement. But, if you were secretly imbued with the power of immortality, chances are it'd take most people nowadays upwards of seventy years to figure it out. Well, the age-halting part

aside, that is. As soon as your peers start to age and you don't, that's when things start getting odd.

Oh yeah, multiple times. A lot of them were in England, where people looked at me as if I had been cursed by a witch - I spent fifty years believing them, but I was never sad that people very occasionally noticed my lack of ageing, or my lack of appetite, or general resilience. I think the most striking of these times was when I worked picking tea leaves in India, some time in the late 1700's. Don't remember if I was with anyone, or I just got bored of overseeing these people, but I ended up there. I feel really quite bad for not being able to chronicle any of that stuff correctly, I didn't have the luxury of being able to keep all of my records and books with me. Most of the time, up until very recently, in fact, I kept those books in a cave in France. No one really knows it's there, but it doesn't matter any more. No, I rolled a stone over the entrance. Just like the Cyclops, yes, it was sort of like that. One time, the leaves and roots of the surrounding foliage had grown over the cave entrance so badly that I thought there was no hope of getting any of my stuff back without causing some damage to the surrounding forest. I mean, it took a while of just hacking bits away, but I eventually did it.

About four hundred years, in fact. I think I might be one of the only people on earth able to say that they witnessed a stalactite form. Well, it only grew a few inches, but I think that definitely counts as being able to see it. I mean, that's the difference between bashing my head on one and safely walking underneath it.

Oh, I managed to find a section of the cave that wasn't flooded so I could store all of my things. Papers, documents, diaries, drawings - even sculptures when I could find the time. Every time I walked out of there, I led my hand along the side of the cave mouth, in the exact same spot, every time. I haven't been able to notice a dent forming as of yet, but there is a stained streak.

Here's something you might not have heard of - they're still using the guillotine to execute people in France! Yeah, they've made plans to abolish it, but I don't think that's going to happen. I just don't see them getting rid of it. Yeah, maybe in like 2000, or maybe 2010.

How far does 2000 seem to you? To me, 29 years isn't a whole lot of time, but I think that can be helped if I keep doing new things. As I said, time stopped speeding up for me because of the things I did. You know, some silly quote about 'It's the life in your years, not the years in your life.' I really hate using other people's quotes, yet sometimes the best way to convey yourself is through the medium of other people's thoughts. Of course, a lot of quotes are too broad for everyday conversation, but some still stick with you, no matter how cheesy they are, no matter how many times people point out that they are clichéd.

Haha, no, I'm no speechwriter. Didn't repeat myself three times there. Three is the magic number when it comes to repetition. Too little and no one remembers it. Too many and you just sound like a broken record. Oh yeah, that's another one too - saying the opposite of what you just said. Some kind of subtle reference to Goldilocks. No, not on purpose, no.

But back to what is said earlier. 2000? What about it? To me, it seems like the dawn of a new age. I think I'll probably celebrate 2000 on the moon, if I'm still alive. Alright, maybe that is a little optimistic. But I think I want to hear your thoughts on the future.

So, nothing at all? Really? I suppose you've been caught up in your present and past as is. But I think talking about the past is only one part of the main human experience. In fact, we spend all of our lives recounting stories and making predictions about the future. It's very rare that we get to talk about the present.

Yes, I know what you mean. But then again, there are very special kinds of friends which you can just talk to again like you hadn't been away from them for five years. That's a wonderful thing. I don't think anyone I know fits into the centre of the Venn diagram with the two sets of 'people I know very well' and 'people I haven't seen in ages'. Well, I suppose there are quite a few in the centre section, but none of them are alive any more.

That's one of the most important things you have to realise with immortality. Since you have to change your locations every now and

then to avoid gaining attention, the last words you say to people won't be emotional goodbyes, they might be something like, 'Can you pick up a six pack from the corner store for me?'

Something menial like that. I think the last words I said to Helen were probably 'Goodnight.' So I suppose it's just a word. And, all things considered, it's pretty meaningful. If you had said that to someone on their deathbed as they died, that would be poignant. The thing that made this one different is the fact it was a 'goodnight' like any other, no tearful tone, no warble in the voice. Just a regular one. A regular ol' 'goodnight'. Is there something special about the last words you say to someone? I mean, you've almost definitely said your last words to a lot of people. People who you've shouted at in traffic, maybe. People in your office who you've bumped into once, a week before they quit. There's a whole world of people out there who have spoken to you once, and then will spend the rest of their lives not speaking to you. Not out of choice, but just because you're no longer present.

Imagine a world where you can see the number of times you'll talk to someone, and that number counts down as the years pass when you have a conversation with that person. You notice one of your closest friends is down to only one conversation left. You spend ages preparing a wonderful conversation, you know he's moving away in a few weeks time, you want to give some kind of heartbreakingly long speech about your time together.

You stop at a red light in your car on your way downtown one day. Your friend pulls up. You attempt to speak to him, but he says 'Talk later, I'm going to see my estate agent.' You don't want to pull away from that junction, but the light turns green. He pulls away quickly, but you still want to talk. He turns off into a side road, and you can't see him any more as the traffic builds up.

Look, what I'm trying to say is that you do not want to know when you're going to lose someone or speak to them for the last time. You'd make preparations, only to have them ruined by life. It's only possible when the death is imminent and predictable, but in that case, it's more about you. When you've had weeks or months to make a eulogy

for someone dying of cancer on a hospital bed, the subject matter will inevitably be about you wanting to show that you care, more than the actual person. A real 'spur of the moment' final speech shows that you paid attention to what that person was like. To be able to craft a paragraph of their life in an instant is a sure sign of a good connection. But, you don't get those moments. Very, very few people get that. No one dies in your arms from a gunshot wound. That doesn't happen. Most people say goodbye to the people they love at some point in their lives. Sometimes it happens before you talk to them for the last time. Would you say that you and your wife have thought of each other lovingly for the last time? Or is there still some inextinguishable spark between you?

Alright, I understand. It's hard to say, I know, there's probably still who she used to be under what she's been like recently. I know it seems very easy to ignore her and all, but she is still the same person as she used to be. Of course, yes, the Ship of Theseus, her cells are replaced every day. I mean, by now, I would expect almost all of the cells in her body from when you loved her to have now gone and be replaced by newer ones. Of course, this doesn't necessarily mean that the constituent components of her consciousness are gone. She can probably still remember the times when you used to have fun.

Oh? So, she's actively moving away from her past. But why? It seems like her past was the best thing about her life, what with meeting you, working with things she enjoyed, and going richly engaging work with good company. Unless, of course, you want to go further back. What do you know about her past? Was she traumatised as a child? All this behaviour about the polaroids seems reminiscent of someone who was once photographed maliciously by someone else. It seems like she doesn't want that kind of thing to happen to anyone else and is taking out her pent up anger on you, despite the fact you haven't done anything. Of course, there is still the possibility that she genuinely dislikes you, but I think that that is very unlikely given the circumstances of your marriage.

I truly understand you feel trapped, and alone, and that the only way out of this nightmarish world is to gain some kind of

otherworldly power. I assure you, one of the reasons you want this immortality is because of the fact that if you think you have some sort of superpower setting you apart from the rest of humanity, you will have the power to overstep other people, to ignore their concerns because they're beneath you, they can't comprehend what you're going through or what you've seen because you've been alive for hundreds of years.

That's not true. You are still human. You are not able to just fly away from all of your problems like Superman. And yet your metaphorical Kryptonite is all around you. The connections you make tie you down to a certain time and place, and yet, they are one of the only things that make life worth living. If it was possible to walk all over the world and become instant, lifelong friends with everyone I met, I would walk until my legs became sore - even for my standards. But you can't. You can't constantly roam the earth with a rag-tag bunch of people - and you want to know why?

Because no one will be like you. They require food, water, nutrients, and sometimes, you might think that you're above all this, but if you show them that you're better than them in some way, they either become jealous and spiteful, or unnaturally close, they seem to want to take what you have for themselves. They want to either kill you or be you. A strange duality.

But if forces you to live as they do, eating, drinking, sleeping, suffering. It's as if you have to live by their rules. And yes, you do. It's not like you have a hidden superpower, it's like you have a curse that you have to hide from everyone. No one can know, that's something that I've learned the hard way. When people know you can't die, no one thinks of you the same way any more. They know you're not the same. People who know you're different in some way they can never hope to be, well, they treat you different. Even if they claim to be the most tolerant people in the world, people hate the objective upgrade of immortality. They might shout and scream at you for being a freak, but that's nothing compared to people that you thought you liked

deciding they don't like you any more. They feel like they can't beat you.

Some of the angrier ones might cope with it by saying it must be hard to outlive everyone you've ever loved, and then as you try to explain that that is something you have had to come to terms with over the course of hundreds of years, they sort of look at you as if they didn't think you could express emotions. All that emotional turmoil should have turned you into a blubbering mess by now, or made you unfeeling, like a rock. It's hard being compared to a rock. But, like a rock, you can outlast them, they will go, you don't need them in your life if they're just going to drag you down.

A regular lifespan is time enough to do that too. To let go of all the things that keep you constrained is something everyone wishes they could do. To be able to go wherever, do whatever, whenever you like. Not infinite bliss, the very notion of bliss that you don't have work for is off-putting to most. No, time to do the things you've been putting off for years. Is there anything that you've wanted to get back to? No creative projects- oh, that's wonderful! Back to the fish market? I think that would be amazing. It hasn't been that long.

You see, if we go back to that world where everyone sees the conversation number over other people's heads, they would have seen you go with a conversation number of five thousand over your head, they would have been more than happy to see you go. Perhaps five years down the line with only a few visits - wait, you never went back? Not once? To visit your mother? Well, but you never thought of making an hour trip to see them? Oh, don't worry. No, I'm just wondering why. Oh, was it... she would have wondered where you were. Alright. So they would have seen you go with a count in the thousands, right, and as the years went on, they might start to panic, and become distressed as to where you are. Maybe they might think they'll just bump into you somewhere else. It doesn't matter. But they get older. One of their close friends might have died. They start wondering some more.

I suppose this thought experiment is to get you to think how we would act if we knew everything that was going to happen. We'd still make a mess of it, to be honest, there's no use in knowing what your future holds unless you have the opportunity to do it over and over again, until you got it just right - or, at the very least, what you thought was right. If there's no option to rewind, you might feel even worse about getting yourself into issues which can't be resolved. If there are days where you can't get yourself out of a bad situation, and you're trapped by the linearity of time, then you will feel awful. Most people don't realise this when they wish they could redo days. Something else bad will happen if this doesn't.

No, I shouldn't be so negative towards you. Real life, the one you're living right now, is so very much different in so many ways. You don't have the ability to change what you did in the past, but that just makes changing your future all the more important. Again, slightly cliché, but I think that kind of motivational speaking gets to people. Like, you don't need this immortality to have enough time to steer the course of your life. In fact, the resources which we have nowadays can help you get even more time in which you can do things meaningfully. Eat good food, drink good drinks, things in moderation, don't smoke. Wait, but you wouldn't stand next to a car exhaust while it was running, right? Look, I get that you need something to take the edge off your stressful life, but I think that spending a lot of money on tobacco is a bad idea, regardless of how good or not it is for you health. I don't think there's a lot more I can say about that. Don't have any evidence of anyone I know getting cancer from smoking. Well, directly from smoking, at the least. Maybe they are healthy. But you know what? I think that if a company tells you that their product is healthy, the first thing I'm going to say to that is 'of course you want me to think this, you want me to buy this'. Let's say tomorrow, some soft drink - pop - company decides to tell you that drinking eight of their drinks a day is part of a balanced diet. I'm going to be suspicious of that. But that's not a reason to boycott them or anything, it's just some kind of hint as to what else you're being sold.

Yeah, one of the biggest things I've seen in the world is the fact we're being sold things all the time. You don't need a tenth of the things these people say. Of course, I'm not saying 'live like me' but I think money is better spent on higher quality, long-lasting things - and yes, I know that's exactly what I'd say, but this holds true for everything. Besides, once you get a human lifetime's worth of use out of a product, no matter how hard-wearing or well-made it is, it's going to start falling apart. I've used hammers until both sides looked roughly the same. I've had chisels become mere lumps of metal. Regular wood saws becoming like a strip for a bandsaw. You couldn't tell what it was originally used for. Maybe archeologists will dig up some of the things I left in that cave one day and say 'the stone age man was a strange being, creating tools with very specific purposes', and then totally misinterpret what the function of the tools were.

'Oh, this is used in a mating ritual.' is my favourite, they just don't get that sometimes, just like we do now, we make things for fun. Not that I have any experience of being a caveman, but still. It's just they seem to want to explain everything away, they reduce the entire human experience to things that we have to do. And, for the most part, especially nowadays, it isn't that way. We spend all of our lives working for those moments where we aren't doing things because we have to. But in a certain sense, we feel we have to do those things. There is this inescapable difference between things we have to do to survive, and things we feel we have to do to live. I think that's a very important distinction to make, whether you're an archeologist or an investor.

There are so many things that you can do to make your life more... oh, what am I doing, telling you this. I can't tell you how to live your life. Life is hard, but becoming immortal won't make it any easier. You just get a different set of problems. And, if you spend a long time doing nothing with yourself, like I have occasionally done, it feels much worse, in some ways. You've got this amazing power, and yet you're choosing to spend a decade doing silly, menial things, it just feels like you're wasting a superpower on reading books.

But that's all that this is, a little bit more time to do the things you wanted to, an hour or two a day can be set aside to books because you have the time now, you don't have to worry about the future any more, since you'll eventually get there, no questions asked.

You can't fly. You can't lift cars off the ground with a single hand. Your greatest enemy is time. You can't do any of those comic book things, but you can sit at home and read books and watch television until a normal human would have died. For the longest time, I didn't think about the long term effects of the things I was reading, I never changed my behaviour to fit my lifespan - or lack of a lifespan. I learned to not fear death, but then the somewhat greater threat of incredible pain surfaced. Going right back to when you first came here, I said that I could be buried under rocks and stones in an earthquake, and I could claw my way out over thousands of years. But the truth is, I don't know what I'd do in that situation. I think thousands of years of isolation would drive me insane. All I would have are these misremembered stories and all the works of literature and television that I've read, all the music that I've listened to. And by the time I get out, that's it, I'm hopeless. Unless society doesn't progress much in thousands of years, I'm going to be found out. Or, worse, I go up on to the surface and there's nothing there to be found except the remnants of nuclear fallout and starving, horrible humans. What do I do at that point except outlive everyone?

One of the scariest things for me is the fact that I have to rely on the world being good - just like any other. If things are bad out there, I have to live through them. So, I think you should know why I'm giving you this. Well, one of the reasons I'm letting you have this. I'm scared of the future. And no, there's nothing for you to be scared about, because I've always been scared of the future. This time, it's just the threat of nuclear war, rather than Napoleon, or revolution, or Hitler, or whatever. I don't think I want to live in a world where things go wrong. But, as I have learned, I have to. I feel that having a few hundred years of experience behind me allows me to soften the blow of the future. I don't want anyone else to have that awful feeling of

disconnectedness, unless they prove themselves to be... well, not worthy, but capable of having this power.

Maybe you have been through enough in this life to warrant you having it. Perhaps, yes, it is time to give someone else this power. But, tomorrow. I don't know what happens when I give it away. Ironically, the person who must have given me it must be dead by now. I just wonder if I'd continue ageing like a normal person after I give it away, or I instantly wither to become a 350-year-old, a mushy pile of grey flesh and osteoporosis-riddled bone before you. Of course, that shouldn't discourage you from taking it. I don't know. I don't mind what happens to me when I die.

When I die, I die, right? Oh, I sort of forgot about the chicken soup. It's good lukewarm, too. Or do you want me to put it in the oven? Sure, go ahead, try it out. Hah, I say 'try it out' like you've never tried chicken soup before.

I've just realised I should have been talking to you as you ate this soup. It's probably put you off eating a bit, all my monologuing about death and war. So I'll monologue about something else. Actually, is there anything you want to watch on TV right now? Any show you're missing? Oh, Marcus Welby. I think I know that, that's the doctor who goes around the houses. A bit idealistic, maybe. I think- Here's Lucy? Oh, the one with Lucille Ball in it. Yeah, no, I used to watch I Love Lucy with Helen. I think we watched another show with her in it, but I don't think it was as good. It wasn't as good.

Only Tomorrow

Did you sleep well? Wait, so what did you do? Anything in particular? Oh, I've always liked that one. Won't tell you what happens. Oh, how many times? Haha, I guess you do have all the time in the world. So, what would you say was your favourite book in the world? Oh, so your favourite book you've read in the last year? Haha, wonderful. I think I read that to my girls at some point. It's quite a short book, perhaps that's why I was able to finish it before she had anything to do with it.

Still can't believe you don't have to sleep. So, you're like, permanently doing things? Do you ever dream if you fall asleep? Oh, dreams are wonderful. Sometimes, they're the best part of my day. No, no, I used to have this dream, well, series of dreams, when I was little boy, and I used to dream about having a fort in my back garden, one with all sorts of hidden passages and walkways, one that towered over our garden so I could see the world around. Dreams are wonderful, I promise. No, it's not a deal breaker, it's just that I'd like to be able to dream. Not a requirement in any way - it's not like I'd give up a potential superpower for the ability to dream! I certainly wouldn't if I was in your shoes.

So what other caveats are there to staying up the whole time? Well, not to be mean, but you're looking a bit bleary-eyed. Hahaha, 'just your age', oh my, how many people have you used that one on, buddy? I shall remember that. Oh, yes, dreams. Well, as I said about the whole 'backyard fort' thing, it was always the worst thing in the world to wake up and realise that you couldn't ever do anything like that in the real world. The planning you'd need to get to build a flimsy wooden structure that high would have taken years to pass. But, analysing it many years after it passed doesn't really do it justice. The very nature of dreams is that of a sort of fuzzy clarity, sometimes you know everything you're doing is fake, sometimes you inadvertently buy into it, you don't understand that there's no consequence to

crashing your car, nothing will change if you take your feet off the pedals. Logical inconsistencies. Moving from place to place in the blink of an eye. Yet, it can feel so lifelike. It's like living in one of those really blurry oil paintings. Alright, maybe not. But there's a hazy clarity, as I said. I remember having some kind of consistency to my dreams that other people said they didn't have. I dreamt of the same things all the time, consistent places, people, the same things would happen again and again.

Once, I dreamt that a nuclear explosion went off, right outside New Orleans. On the coastline. I felt the warm air coming off the blast as if it was real, and I stood there, feeling the worst I had done in an incredibly long time. I'd seen a few tests in some film I saw a long time ago, I think it was 'taken' from that. But because I was standing there, thinking it was real, my heart and stomach sank, I was just genuinely horrified. Nothing could take me out of the moment. There was nothing that could dissuade me from thinking that the end of the world was near, that wars were going to break out, that everything would be awful, that the USSR and the US were going to go to war with one another. Well, maybe not at the time, I didn't think about the end of things when I was younger.

In fact, that's one of the best things about dreams. People love interpreting them in different ways. I think it's just a mishmash of things you haven't really thought about much during the day. It's like you need a load more time than time in the day to process what you've seen. Walk past a bunch of rotting fruit on your way home - provided you don't usually see rotting fruit - and you'll have dreams that contain rotting fruit.

Oh yes, as you get older, they do get less interesting. But that ties in with what you said about life speeding up. You bump into less new things. You have less new experiences.

Remind me again, what was that book you said you read? I think I remember seeing it in the front of a bookstore last month. Something about a... yes, the seagull. Johnathan Livingstone Seagull. Actually, I think that might be another reason I wanted to be immortal. Something about the way he was surrounded by people who kept him

down was just frustrating to me. I think I might have read it with too much enthusiasm to slip by my wife's ears. Yes, I do think that it's a little too moralising, but I think that the author intended it to be like that. I like books like that. I think that people who claim to write 'intelligent' literature are just a bit stuck up. Eight hundred page tomes are just wrong. What's the point? Most of what I think is truly great works of literature are dismissed as simple. I think simplicity just works.

Well, I'm not talking like 'Green Eggs and Ham', no matter how much personal significance it has to you, it's not... enough. I don't know how to phrase it properly. I like what I like.

I feel like I would broaden my horizons if I was given more time. But a lot of the time, I feel like if I was given many more hours in the day to do the same things I do now, I'd just spend the same proportion of my time on meaningless things. I'd spend all of those extra hours sitting and watching television.

Alright, maybe I don't need immortality. Maybe I need some kind of motivation to go out and do the things I like. Wait! No! Immortality gives me all of those things. I can leave my life behind. I don't have to be motivated by anything if there isn't an eventual limit on what I can do! I'd get to choose when I go! You do realise that's why you're like you are, right? You're fearless because you don't have the inevitability of death hanging over you, like some sort of cliché, metaphorical noose.

Right, right. Other people. Only as strong as the weakest link. Yes, I do apologise for going off like that, it's just that I'm usually cranky in the mornings before I've had coffee. Yeah, no, didn't bring any - but what do you have in the fridge? Ah, so all you drink is tea. I've never been a huge tea man myself. I think part of my family is from the UK. Haha, I mean recently, of course. Not the original lot who came over here. Actually, what did you think of all the overseas explorers who came back from distant lands with cool products? It must have been incomprehensible. Yeah, right, yeah, no pictures, no knowledge of how the world looked from above. I think that's an important thing about us now. Now that we've all seen that 'earth rise' picture, I think

we all get we're here now. Of course, that's making some bold assumptions, but I think on the whole, people know about the world they live on. At least they might know the continents a little better.

Well, the education system is partly to blame. I think the way they teach kids is kind of depressing. But, I really doubt that anyone's trying to indoctrinate my kids at school. They don't come home showing any different emotions compared to when they left. It doesn't 'suck the life out of them' as some people claim. I'd love to have more time, or actually, more freedom, so I could home school them. But then, if that were to ever happen, I'm sure that I would get called in to work a lot more often, and then she would have to teach them.

Look, one of the things I loved about her was her care-free nature. And as a thirty five year old, you think that youthfulness is one of the most desirable things in a woman you could ever think of. She was only 27 at the time, I believe, but she acted like someone five, maybe even ten years younger than her. Yes, I understand that when you get down to that age, even one year changes how the person appears. But she acted like she was nearly half her age! Half her age! And that was why I always stuck up for her, because she was getting to the point in her life when she realised that she was going to have to work to make her life better than it was. It wasn't just a natural upward path any more. But that's what was so fun about us. If she started off acting like she was a teenager, having someone who shared her interests and supported her in following her dreams must have been the best thing ever.

No, I don't think her father was very present in her life. What does that have to... alright, maybe I get where you're coming from. You're trying to imply she wanted some kind of supporting figure in her life, and she chose me because I subsidised some parts of her lifestyle and I was older than her. Look, I don't think she could deal with dating anyone her age or younger, since she would have had some kind a breakdown if she was confronted with the things she wished to be. I think she naturally gravitated towards older people, and I don't blame her for it. Quite a few of my friends at my first job were older than me. They were just happy to have someone around who was willing to

do things. I suppose for them it was like how I felt towards her. They saw youth as something to be interacted with, not worked towards. I think once you get to around forty or so, you sort of have to accept the fact that things aren't going to be the way they used to be. In any way. A lot of things change. But you can sort of keep yourself from going further on. It's like going down a steep, one way street on a bike. You can put the brakes on, but it's not like you're going to be able to cycle up again without some serious effort. But enough with the metaphors.

Actually, do you think you get better at making metaphors as you've experienced so much of the world? Well, apart from the expressions that have died out. That's really quite cool, having something you like go out of fashion because the words aren't used any more. A lot of regional phrases in there as well, I bet? Have you got any of them written down anywhere? Right, well, since we're probably going to be doing things this morning and afternoon, I'll take a look at them in the evening. Um, yes, I'm leaving this evening, probably after dinner. No worries, I don't think I should stay longer than I have to, she'll get worried.

I know that. But getting here was a huge step for me. Yes, it is odd, she doesn't want me away from her - 'in danger' as she says, the roads are too icy, you might end up being a serial killer and kill me. Some of the things that she says I can't do are in *direct* contradiction of the things she wants me to do. It's like the only place I can exist without fear of criticism is the garage. That garage. I think I've heard her call me a 'garage werewolf', and that I change when I'm under the strip light we have on the ceiling in there. Yeah, white. Like a dentist's office.

I don't like thinking about that place too much, it just seems off whenever I'm outside of it. Now that I've been away from my family for a few days, I think that going back to normality with them seems impossible. No, really. We haven't been for a holiday in years. Every time I have something booked, she seems to counter-book her relatives visiting us. When they come and visit us, they always have to commiserate me on having missed a holiday, always justifying their

stay with the ‘Well, you guys shoulda planned it better!’ and a cheeky smile.

I know they’re not doing that on purpose. But it does take all my effort not to shout at them or cry. I just can’t take shit like that, even if they don’t mean it. Yeah, that’s the worst. Someone reminding you of something you can’t have, even if they’re not intentionally setting out to annoy you. And the fact they don’t know it and you can’t say anything is much worse.

Her side of the family actually likes me, I think. At least I hope I’m right in thinking that. No, it’s just that if they don’t like me either, then I basically have no friends outside of work, and even then, my work friends aren’t very good. You know, where I work, a lot of new, young recruits are with me. I suppose it’s like the opposite of when I started working. Now, instead of me being young and surrounded by old people, they’re young, and surrounding me, the old person.

A lot of the time, I wonder what they see in me. Sometimes I think they have me around just so they can check their own decline against mine, use me as some kind of yardstick for what paths in life to avoid taking. But, when I’m feeling better about myself, I think that they might see the experience as useful. A lot of them were born after the war. Well, I say that like I fought in the war myself. I didn’t. But some of these guys have seen their friends leave for good, they didn’t come back from Vietnam. That has to age you, right? Seeing your friends die is something that should be reserved for people older than me. I don’t want to see any of these people to lose their friends. Of course, it wasn’t as unexpected as Rick’s death, but this is a different kind of thing. These people could have gone to war based on their birthday! Really! It seems dystopian, right, it seems like it’s the plot to a science fiction novel. Something like 1984. Wow, that’s only thirteen years away now.

Ha, yeah, I suppose it’s not that long for you to wait. Actually, what are you waiting for right now that has a definite date? Well, as am I. I think it’ll be cool to say that I lived through two centuries. That is, if I actually live that long. Maybe there’s something in living to 2000 by myself, without the aid of immortality. How many people did you say

you met about this sort of thing again? Right. And how much longer do you think you'll be around for before you give it away?

Hahaha, what, like existence is a TV show? That you're just going to turn off if it gets boring? Surely if you say life is a TV show, then you relegate yourself to the role of the consumer. You're just sitting in front of a screen, passively absorbing life - and before you say anything - yes, I know you're not doing that. But it just seems disingenuous to do that to yourself.

Erm... yes, I think we should go right up there. Do they do drinks in the bakery? That's great then. And where else should we go to afterwards? Right, sure, that's good. I suppose if I had a choice I'd want to see what this place looks like from the top of the hill - alright, yeah, sounds good.

How many turns does the lock go? Oh, you don't? Sure, seems reasonable. I mean, I've heard stories of tiny communities which are so tightly knit and so off the grid that they don't even lock their doors. You could just walk over to someone's house. As someone with a gate outside their house, I think that there's something to be said about living out in the wilderness. Aren't bears more of a threat when it comes to home security? Hahaha, that's amazing.

Look, I know that you don't have to wear a coat, but don't the people in the village get suspicious? Actually, stupid question, all of them are probably used to the weather too. I have to say, it is a lot better than yesterday. I suppose if we were in the sun then it would be a lot warmer. But - no, we don't have to move off this path, I'd like some breakfast first, as I suppose you might, too. Yeah, I know.

So what kind of things do they do apart from bread? Just pastries then - not a problem, I'll be fine with that. Love some pastries. Just not too many. Don't want to gain too much weight. I mean, with the amount of beer that I drink, it's a surprise that I'm as thin as I am. As thin as I *think* I am. Haha, I suppose you could say that.

Alright, so, what do you think about giving me that immortality? As in, if you are going to give it to me, when would you? I assume you'd give it to me as I left. But what about if you die? Won't the

others think I killed you? You invite so many people over to your house and then you mysteriously die, having had no health problems for years?

Right, I see. And when would you consider someone 'ready'? Alright. Sure. Well, I think that I'm ready for this, but it's up to your judgement. No, it's not that I'm trying to push you to do it, I just think there's... actually, no. There is a point in waiting. Um, just a technical question, do you stay the same age or do you revert back to your 'prime' if that can be a thing? Ah. Right. I wouldn't say I'm terribly in pain at this moment, but it would be nicer to live my life as a slightly younger man. I could have climbed one of those trees when I was younger. You just bounce up if you hit the ground. Now, I don't think I could do that. I'd just break.

Oh, of course. I don't do that now. I don't smoke a lot, and drinking is reserved for special occasions. She says I get violent when I drink, which isn't true. I just sleep. I get tired very quickly when I'm drunk. Oh, just a little bit when I was younger. Well, 20 years younger. Yes. No, I couldn't during my school years. I don't think anyone knew about it over here. No idea how it came over here. Maybe immigrants or people who had come back from other parts of the world during the war. It seems unlikely, though. Oh, no, I was never a hippie, or anything like it. Not that I didn't have an interest in what they were campaigning for, it's just that I didn't really have many other friends who were into the whole thing. Plus, Mara wouldn't have let me grow my hair out. Not sure if it would have been the best idea, in retrospect. Lost my hair shortly after that. Well, some of it. Yeah, it's sort of annoying. I wonder if I'd have a full head of hair if I became immortal. Did you ever age further than you have now, and then reverse? Right, right. Alright, I understand that. So I suppose, for a lot of these effects, I'm going to be a true guinea pig. A test pilot, even. But I can't really get off if things go wrong, right? I could just give it back to someone else. Of course, then I'd have to convince them of whether or not they should have it. Reminds me of a parable that I only have vague memories of. Something about being unable to sell

something debilitating because the cost approaches zero, something like that. No, I don't remember where I heard it first.

Right, so where were we? Smoking, right. Before that. Actually, I don't think we can really go back to anything. Most of our conversations were tangents. In fact, I don't think there was an original conversation behind all of this. No, I'm being serious, I think this one was just layers of small talk. Perhaps it's more like medium talk. Talking about the possibility of gaining immortality is larger than small talk, I think. Right.

I think just looking at the world is all I need right now. Just having a proper look at the world around, the birds, the trees, the clouds. Even the far-off pylons. They're part of the scenery everywhere you go, so why don't we treat them as such? I don't think they're completely hideous, there is a certain wonder in the way that the cables seem to go up and down, and hang down in those perfect arcs below.

I'm only saying this because in the months before I went to come and see you, after I managed to book a meeting off of my friend, I walked to and from my office in Rochester from that diner nearly every day. Oh yeah, it took forever, something like two hours either way, on the way there in the morning, and on the way home at night. It's a bit out of the way for me to walk all the way there, it's just over thirty five miles. I should mention I drove my car out and parked in that diner every morning, and so my wife didn't think anything was up. I knew she'd never find me, she doesn't tend to leave the house to do anything other than go shopping or take the kids to school when the bus isn't running. Actually, she'd never go there because it's kind of a family affair, the people in there have been running it with the same grease in the fryers since grease was something to fry things in.

Oh, how I wish the name was 'Alice's Restaurant'. I really do wish it was. Anyway, over those half-dozen or so visits to the place, I really got to know the people there. When I go, it's just past the time all the truckers have woken up and had their breakfast, so the whole place smells like bacon and it's completely empty. The two sons who do most of the cooking go out the back and play football at this time, and

Liz just sort of sits around. She's their mother. Her daughter is off at college most of the time, apparently, and her husband has been gone for a good few years now. Not dead, just an amicable divorce. I'm told he was very respectful.

I think most people who go in there expect to be able to try and have their way with Liz, but she'll beat you back. I didn't try, but I've seen the odd hitchhiker think he's hot shit and she just puts them in their place. Still gives them a hot breakfast. I wouldn't like to go over it too much. Probably a loogie in there. Probably not hers. I think if she was ever threatened properly, the boys in the kitchen would beat that guy to death.

I do love their family. They're not especially close, not with the daughter being gone the whole time, and... oh, I forgot his name again... umm... her dad being divorced for a while. Well, at least when I've been there. I think he turns up at night. I have a suspicion they live in the place. Anyway, they don't have the strongest bond in terms of 'I love you and I will now hug you' kind of love, but I think if anything bad happened to one of them, all of the others would be there in an instant to deal some retribution. It works for them, and it works for me. I get pleasant conversation about the world around us (she's into nature, like trees and bugs) and also a nice hot serving of pancakes with maple syrup. I have no idea where they get it from, but it's the best I've ever had. None of that Jemima crap. It's just nothing compared to this. Actually, if I'm being realistic, they just add sugar.

I think that helps the food taste better. If Mara cooks me food, then I think she cares about if I'll be healthy or not. It can be a little overbearing at times, but at least I know the food I'm eating is generally healthy. Whenever I go to that diner, though, I know their sons don't care if I die from heart failure. They want me to love them for their food, not for their compassion. Unfortunately, they succeed at both. It rained one time I was there, and the rain really picked up. I could barely hear myself talking over the sound of rain on the metal roof, but all four of us were just sitting around, understanding what we meant through the white noise. Imagine the sound of a TV between channels played through the speaker system at a Led

Zeppelin concert. That's what we're talking. But the best thing about that conversation wasn't the conversation. It was the fact that even under all this deafening noise, we could still get it. You get what I mean by *get it*? Hah, I suppose you get it, too. It was wonderful. It's like we didn't have to talk to give our thoughts to others. We just knew what we were thinking. So we get to talking about when it gets busy, and Liz said that it gets busy late at night, she said it's a real funhouse, sometimes they get truckers who try their hand at forming jam sessions with a microphone and some old instruments that they have lying around. Apparently, her daughter was obsessed with music, but since she wasn't around now, they didn't really have any use for them.

I called in sick to work, that day. I spent the whole day driving around, and I came back to my house in the evening, and said to Mara that I'd be needed to work late the following day, as we had a big meeting coming up and I needed to work on someone else's quarterlies. Something like that. Alright, the following morning, I go round to the restaurant, I see Liz, she's all well and good, and I have a conversation with her. I say that it would be lovely to come here and help out when it gets busy, perhaps wait some tables (she had mentioned it before, it wasn't out of the blue) and I said how I probably wouldn't be able to make it since I usually had to either be at home with my kids or at work, preparing for a meeting. She said if I could stop by later on, that would be great, and she took great care in making sure I wasn't under any obligation. She said that the place had run just fine under her watch for ten years. I said it was almost impossible to find the time to come here at night. I took some pancakes with me to the office that day, too.

Right, so I spend the day at work, and then I quickly go and rent a tuxedo, I figure I might as well look the part while I'm working here, and so I get a little bow tie too, and I put it all on in the car, and I drive back to the diner, and I can hear music coming from the inside, and there are a few lights. I pull in, and the first thought that comes to mind is 'oh, wow, this is amazing, I'm going to have an amazing

evening', but then I look around. I just parked my car right up next to the restaurant. There are no other cars there.

Initially, my plan was to go through the back door and walk through the kitchen, and surprise her, but I think this was a slightly odd thing to do if there wasn't going to be anyone there.

I walk in. It's loud, there's some Neil Young song playing, and the only person in the whole place is Liz. She's dancing by herself, poorly, and the whole time, she's tossing chairs around like it's some kind of sport. I walk over to her. She's not angry or anything, she's just drunk. Well, I suppose she was angry, but it was very muted by the amount she had drunk. There was a bottle of whiskey on the counter, which had been placed down on its side. She's not angry at me, she just cries at me. 'Why'd you come? Why'd you be so nice? Look at you! You have a bow tie!'

I was surprised that she noticed this even in her state. She then told me she hadn't drunk very much, and she really was just a little pissed off. She had discovered there was another, sleeker place which had opened on illegal ground, a mile or so down the road, and they had all neon lights and things, so they were getting all the customers. She had turned the music and lights on all the way to try and attract those people back.

I told her we'd go for a drive. And we did. And we drove to this spot, just outside of town, and we sat under the moonlight, and we just held hands for a while. Not in a remotely intimate way, or anything, but in a way that just proved that I was doing something wrong. I had missed out on moments like this for the past decade, it seemed.

The very next day, I went to work - oh, yes, she was fine, she cried a little, but she was fine and happy - and I talked to a few of my friends about where they went to for food. I suggested we go down to this little place, just outside of town, for an after-work get-together. And I led the party there, and we all went there, and we had all sorts of food, and the boys and Liz actually came and ate with us, rather

than watching over us like vultures, ready to take our plates away. No, this was wonderful. The rain started to pour as people began to go home, one by one, and soon enough, it was my turn. Liz was holding court, she was a couple of beers in, and I think she out-drunk some of my co-workers. Some of them thanked me on their way out, as if I had done anything. I'd just pointed them in the right direction.

I go there a few days later, early in the morning, and I see one of my co-workers there. He says he has another job somewhere else, and he's telling all of his friends about this place. Apparently, some of his Vietnam-based friends will know about this place soon. I think they just want a good taste of American cooking. And know they know where to find it.

Speaking of cooking, those croissants look lovely. I wonder if they're actually as good as they look. I doubt it. I like the visual aspect of food more than I should, and I find myself disappointed more often than not. I suppose I should lower my standards.

In Another Way

Honestly, I have to say, Daniel, that that's genuinely wonderful. Getting all those people to help this woman out when she needed it? That... that's pretty good. So, how did the whole thing work out? Did she get many returning customers? Brilliant. Just brilliant. Honestly, I was quite uncomfortable with the whole 'dancing alone with a bottle of whiskey' kind of direction that was taking. It's good to know that life isn't always a down. Oh, uh, what do you want - I'll pay.

Yeah, so, you see those ones down there - they put cream on them. I don't think we make cream any more, but it doesn't matter. They're good, regardless of what you put on them. Well, maybe not completely regardless, but you get what I mean, right? Yeah, I suppose that would be the best choice. Jam it is. Blueberry Jam.

Hey, did you know that at the end of 'Strawberry Fields Forever', you can hear Ringo say 'strawberry jam' over and over again. Helen heard it one afternoon when she had the record player on really loud since she was outside doing the gardening, and she walked back in to see if the record needed to be turned over, and she just heard this weird voice. Well, I think he says something else, but she thought it was 'strawberry jam'. Anyway, bit of pointless trivia for you.

Oh, yes, I've learned millions of pieces of pointless trivia over the years. Far from it, I think most of the stuff I know is pointless. And best of all, it's not even entertaining. If I tell you that the route over the river Severn can be halved if you know who 'Ferryman John' is, then nothing in your life changes. But if I tell you that little thing about Strawberry Fields Forever, then there's a chance you'll have the EP at home, and you'll put it on, and you might think 'yes, this is something'.

Yeah, uh, can we have a, uh... I'm going to go for two plain croissants, Rob, jam in both, please.

You can keep the change. Yeah, no, don't worry. Honestly, it is alright. Please. Just use it for something. Maybe not cigarettes, your

dad doesn't want you spending a load of money on that. Haha, no, I don't think you would. No, you're not like some of the others. You're strong, Rob. I shouldn't need to remind you of this. Now go and do something else, I'll shout if someone comes in.

Pointless trivia is something that a lot of people seem to want to collect. It seems weird that to a lot of people, people on television who can remember hundreds of these little things about the the second longest river in Europe is, they seem to be idolised by others. It's just weird, right? It's not like it's guaranteed that they're going anywhere near these places. Some look at this obsessive recounting of facts and just see this well-travelled individual. I just see someone with his head in a book for far too long.

Ah, do stop me when I say things like that. I am pretentious when it comes to my defending of how people should accumulate trivia. It's a strange and small hill to die on, but whenever I see these people, I think back to the Ancient Greek olympics. These people are like the professionals, banned from competing because all they do is train. You should accumulate this trivia from seeing random drunks in bars, or having your friends tell you something interesting that they've heard. I always refer back to the original aim of the Guinness Book of Records when it comes to this sort of thing. Now that is a book that is there to settle questions and debates, not be learnt. The fact that Robert Wadlow was the world's tallest man is not that impressive by itself.

In fact, I say almost all of the skill in trivia-centric talk is knowing when to use them in conversation. You can't just use them on their own. They're just - excuse me - trivial. I mean, not a whole lot of things are useful on their own, knowing how to apply your knowledge is an entirely different thing.

No, no, I've forgotten most of it. Isn't that the point? It's single-use information. Disposable, even. It just goes to the landfill at the back of your mind, just waiting to be salvaged. Of course, it's not coming out of there. I bet you've had some memories which you wish you could remember better. No, come on, it can't all be bad. There has to be some buried childhood memory that is just sitting there, and you can't

remember it as much as you'd like to. Right, right. Even recent ones, right?

One of the ones which I wanted to remember better is the time I spent over in-

Hey, what I wanted to say is that I'm... I don't think I'm... I'm not here to listen to your stories. I have to say, so far, I've been hugely invested in them, but it doesn't seem right that you can wax lyrical about all of these things that you've done that no one else will ever have the opportunity to do all at the same time. You don't have to worry about spending your days recounting stories, not creating any new memories. I have limited time on this earth, you see, I'm not here to hear this. I'm here for what you have to say about me. And if, somehow, by interrupting you so abruptly, I have failed this 'test' that you have set out for me, that by failing to pay attention to misremembered anecdotes and endless repetition of the same basic storytelling concepts I am now no longer going to be granted the gift of eternal life while still remaining thoroughly on this earth, then I'll just go.

Yes. I want you to judge me for this. For this outburst. I have been thinking about this, long and hard, I wish for you to just snip my suffering short. Did I fail the test? Is this part of the test? Is acknowledging this could be a test part of the test? Do I win? I mean, are you even immortal? I would ask you to do something that would kill someone, but that would be horrible. I don't want anyone to- I don't want you to have to do anything you don't feel you need to. But I think that your stories are interesting, there's no doubt about that, but it just seems that it's... bragging? To an extent? I'm sorry. I'm just tired. I just need something. I think one of the reasons that I feel the way I do is that all of these stories only mean something when they can be meaningfully applied to your own life. You can't put yourself in the shoes of someone who has lost everything, and then knows that they're going to die, too. That's where the real struggle comes from, right?

If you can just finish what you're going to say, and then judge me for who I am, then that would be good.

I'm so sorry. I really don't mean it when I say I hate anything. I've just become so used to hating things, that I've forgotten how to just listen. I'm used to everyone around me having nothing interesting to say. Without sounding too arrogant, I just know what they're going to say before they say it. And that repetition of 'I need those quarterly reports' or 'Can you go and do the shopping after work?' just makes me feel that it's all scripted. Like I have nothing to say any more. I just say what is expected of me. I just do what is expected of me. I listen all day. But, no, sorry, you're different. Really. I just don't know what to say any more.

Is there anything you wanted to say urgently? I'm not going to stop you. This whole thing is a big deal, I thought telling you about my time in India might give you some time to mull over the fact that one day, you could do this. Or something like it. No worries. Really, no, it's fine. I wouldn't say it's rude, I have been talking too much. Really, I think I have been. Honestly. You can talk now, if you want.

If you insist, then here goes- right, I was in... India. And there was a whole load of people there, I mean, this was a long time ago, so if you were to see many people, that was a rare thing. A really rare thing. But seeing this many people in one place seemed... wrong. I worked for a tea plantation, and due to my skin colour and ability to speak English, I was higher up in the... food chain. I was the manager, right, and I suppose there are certain parts of my life that I would rather not think about too much.

Being around all those people just made me think 'How is it that every single one of these people works for pennies from us, and they break their backs, but every single day they come into work with a smile on their faces.' I was ignorant to the truth for a very long time. The idea of workplace image has been around for far too long. I realised that my co-managers would just hit them if they didn't smile, especially if there were any people coming round to inspect us. They just saw the smiles and the row of good housing at the front of the complex we built for them, not the unending torment and squalid huts on the inside.

One of the things I couldn't believe about what they did is the whole caste system. The fact that some people were just relegated to be worse than others just made me kind of mad. Like, they were already basically subhuman, the way we treated them, but there was a sort of self-flagellation of sorts. Like, they saw themselves as something that the others were sort of allowed to walk over. Of course, I might be exaggerating, extrapolating from what I've seen, but there just seemed to be a universal 'this is fine' kind of feeling. I think it comes from the fact that they hadn't industrialised before their population increases. Like, they were still walking around with no manufactured clothes when they had megacities, or possibly just mega-slums, or whatever they would have been. I think that exposure to hundreds of thousands of people, just clambering on top of one another, just trying to get by. I think exposure to that kind of suffering on a great scale has to change you, your whole moral philosophy has to be informed by the fact that there are hundreds of millions of people going through the exact same thing that you are, something I think that Western individualism sort of misses.

We get so wrapped up in our own lives that I think many of us miss the fact that everyone around you has their own problems, their own issues, and - on average at least - those issues are just as strong and overwhelming as yours. I think that happens a lot nowadays. It's very easy to for a very long time without talking to anyone about anything that matters. This is, perhaps, part of the reason why I've invited so many people here, and given none of them the gift of immortality. It's because when I'm done, I realise that, perhaps there is something worth living for, that there are people out there who are willing to tackle big questions. And I think your little speech there - no, it's not an outburst, you didn't shout or go any louder than you needed to. Umm... your little speech there just showed me how much you seem to care about this. You seem like the kind of person who wants to have those big conversations, you're not sold by anecdotes but enthralled by their implications. And I like that. I like that a lot.

That being said, I'm not going to just let you have immortality, just like that. It's not that easy. It's not hard, either. The more we talk

about it, the harder it becomes for me to make a truly objective decision about whether or not you deserve it. Yeah, I think 'deserve' is the wrong word, too. 'Earn' is just as bad. I just can't think of anything that lets me represent my feelings in a single word.

Oh, I'm sure the Germans have a word for it, or something like a word, but I don't like the way that they make new words. They just stick other adjectives and nouns together to make new words for obscure feelings. If it can be defined in English as the description of the word, then it's not a feeling that cannot be expressed in English. You just have to try a little harder.

Yeah, I suppose so. I'm glad I speak English to be honest, I love the fact that whenever we take words or phrases from other languages like 'déjà vu', they're quite sublime and seem to fit right in, but it seems like whenever we invent something like television, the French seem to hate putting it into their own language. I just assume all those clunky consonants are just too much for them, hahaha.

Anyway, back to the point of suffering. I don't think I will need to discuss the things that I did while I was in India. I think it was after I was someone use taking away a child for a week as punishment that I truly realised what we were here for. Looking back, I don't think that man was a very good representative of all of us, but I think the ones who felt the strongest about punishment spoke the loudest. It's always the people who act in the strongest ways that get picked up. It's not easy to go out and find tales of mediocrity, it's quite hard in fact, but that's what we should aspire towards. Not doing excellent things, but just good ones. Just working toward something.

Do you have a goal? I understand that right now that that goal might be a little hazy, with what we're talking about right now, but before you came to visit me, did you have anything you were working towards? No? What about the lady at the diner? Well, yes, that counts even if it's not a goal that there's something concrete to work towards. Even if it means getting, let's say, two hundred customers a day there. Let's say that that is your goal. How would you work towards it?

Yeah, I get you, you're thinking well. Advertising, marketing, whatever - but I like that, the unorthodox measures. Haha, I suppose

you could. It doesn't matter too much if you're just theorising, though. It could help so much if you just... told some more of your friends about it. Hopefully when those guys come back from Vietnam then things might pick up again. Oh, and as for the other people? The ones on the illegal ground? Yeah, no, seems about right. They'll be found out in time.

One thing that didn't seem right about it was the fact that they had neon lights on illegal ground. Surely, if you were trying to set up something that big, then you wouldn't draw too much attention to it. Is it a laundering thing? How do you know it's illegal?

Hmm, but what about if she's lying. Look, I don't think she'd lie to you to make you feel better, or for any personal reason, really. I'm just saying that she might be trying to hide something from you. Not for any personal reason, to be honest, but maybe she's just embarrassed about something. I understand. You just have to realise that there might be people out there who have the same issues as you, you can't rely on individualism to separate you from everyone else. A lot of people miss out on the fact that we're all just sort of winging it through life. No one has anything truly figured out. And all we can do is sort of embrace the absurdity of life, right? There's no point in saying that nothing means anything, because it doesn't get you anywhere.

There's this guy called Albert Camus who I've been reading about recently, and he's got this whole system of belief that revolves around the fact that the world is absurd. Actually, there's more to it than just the world being absurd. It's not absurd by itself, it's just absurd when humans are put into it. Seems right, no? There isn't anything about the world that is inherently weird, and there is nothing about humans being absurd by themselves either, but when the two meet, then that's where things get odd. The world is full of opportunity, in fact, far too full of opportunity to make sense of it all. And we're making it harder for ourselves, the endless choice of supermarket shelves just doesn't end, the fact we have to work to live, the fact we have to do anything other than provide for ourselves is just strange, right? It doesn't seem right that there is anything at all for us to do, to work towards. If we

were to make it so that we didn't need to fulfil any of our basic needs, and that eating, excreting, reproducing, was all taken care for us, there would still be something to work towards, right? Humans, well, some humans at the least, just have a desire to make things. To make art. to make money. To make food for other people and thus make them happy. We just have these external means to work towards, if you think about it. You have to come up with something, though, because you can't just work aimlessly. Even if you think you're spending your time in far too disparate things, you're working on providing for your family and also working to make this nearby diner a safe haven for good food and company, those are reconcilable objectives. You're not bad at working towards these things, from what I gathered so far, you appear to be fairly financially stable, and apart from your personal issues, most other things are okay. You might not be happy at your job, but right now the sadness of not making any money to support your family would be comparatively more than the happiness you would get by leaving your job and attempting to find a new one.

Yes, I understand. I don't think you're bad at working towards what you want at all, I think other people just get in the way of this. And I get that by becoming immortal, then suddenly two things are changed - you no longer have a specific timeframe in which to work within, and you also no longer have to stick around the same people forever. You could go and walk forever, you could commit a crime and get a sentence, but when you leave, you would be no younger than when you left. After thousands of years of being alive, the 35 year stint in prison won't seem like much anymore. Things will come to pass, it's true. Given enough time, everyone will forget who I am, whether I die or not. That's because I keep making these new identities, these new starts, just so I can keep track of who I am as a whole. It's not nice to have to just sit there and be the same person, I understand, that's why I want someone else to experience it. But, at the same time, I would feel cheated just giving this away, right next to the dawn of a new millennium. Perhaps, some days after I die, if I live until 2000, they'll find the cure for ageing and everyone will get to live how I have done.

I don't think I'd like to live in that world for very long. Not because I'd hate the fact that I'm not the only special one, but because I think most people would miss the point. There is no point in going out and getting yourself injured - anyone who uses immortality as an excuse to do bad things was just looking for an excuse anyway. Plus, how would things like life sentences work? Will people only be released from prison when something really serious happens, like the fall of the society that kept them inside? I can see this kind of thing happening. Plus, if there was any kind of divide between the ones that lived forever and the ones who didn't, that would be awful. For example, if the treatment cost a hundred thousand dollars, then there would be people who just couldn't afford it, and would spend the rest of their lives working, and skimping, and living horrible, cheap, frugal lives just to see if they could save up enough, and then they'd be hit by a car crossing the street while heading to the bank. I can see this kind of thing happening. I can see the horrible headlines.

No, if we were going to be immortal, then people can't know about it. If you don't know you're immortal, then that's the best sort of immortality. There's no extra expectation put on you. Of course, eventually, you find out, that's sort of a given, but by then, you'll have matured enough to figure out what to do and what not to do. At least that's what I hope people would do.

I think there would be horrible inequality, and that people from most, if not all religions, would come out against it, saying that it is a perversion of the natural order. And this time, they might be right. I think that if we're going to go into this and be immortal, then we have to do it all at once, like a step in human evolution. Something that we all have to agree on. I think it could fix a lot of things.

Sometimes I think about the number of humans in the world and it takes me back to those times on the Indian valleys, looking over massive cities filled with uncountable - I mean literally uncountable, the census data is awful - numbers of people. I think that the world might all end up like that one day. There doesn't seem to be a slowing down in the number of people who are being born, and as the survival

rates of babies gets higher, then it's going to be bad. I've read some articles in the paper that say we're going to be at ten billion people by 1999. And this number keeps getting bigger. I'm not saying we're going to run out of room, but I think that things are going to get strange, pretty quickly once we start having to work together to produce enough food for everyone. We're going to have to adopt some of that 'cog in the machine' thinking that some eastern countries seem to have nailed down. Of course, thinking that you're a cog in the machine is commonly associated with work, and suffering, and in doing large amounts of things you don't want to have to do while working towards thing you do want, like money. But I'm talking about being happy to be a cog in the machine. And that doesn't mean being content with the way that the world is now, but changing the world so that everyone can do the things that they are passionate about or suited to, or allow them to have the time to do the things that they want to. I'm not really trying to advocate for a world where people can just do whatever they want, but there are some things that people shouldn't have to do, and if we can make their jobs easier or just change the idea of the job entirely, then that's a good thing.

However. There is a big issue with this idea, and that is that people will not use their free time in the way that anyone would envision. They'll just sit on their couch, watching more TV as the days go by. I've always thought that if we added an extra hour to the day, we'd just sleep through it. If we added an extra five hours to the day, we'd just watch more TV or be forced to work those hours. it wouldn't be a natural extension to the day. If there was a whole five hours up for grabs, the comparatively sedate idea of hobbies would get beaten out by the fact that we can now work for five extra hours a day. It wouldn't be a world in which I'd want to live in.

Once, and I know this is going to sound borderline anecdotal, I read this article in the newspaper about the researchers at the Amundsen-Scott station, right down near the South Pole, and the 'days with no night' that they get because they're below the Antarctic Circle. Well, it says that on times of the year with no real day-night cycle, they defaulted to days that were thirty hours long, with

eighteen waking hours and twelve sleeping hours. I tried that out for a while, for a few thirty-hour days, I just felt bad since I wasn't able to sleep during the nights, or stay awake during the day. I think it might not work for us and the whole day-night cycle, but since this place is pretty far north, then maybe I might try it when the nights get long, later this year. Hopefully it will work better. But yes, it does seem a little strange that humans seem to 'default' to something which doesn't align with 24-hour days. Hmmm. Yeah. We're just not built for midnight sun, I guess.

I suppose, in a way, that we're not really built for most of the things around us. How much of the world can really be considered 'world', as opposed to 'human' now? Are we really... yes, I... hahaha. I suppose you're right. No, I'm not writing any of this down or making a book. That being said, I've always wanted to write a book. No, there's nothing to do with time that's stopping me, just the inspiration. Yes, I know, it seems I have all of these stories and nowhere to put them.

I think that making them into poorly veiled metaphors that closely resemble my own life would be disingenuous. They're real people, right, and most of them are gone now, or at the very least are likely to be. It seems an insult to reduce them to a footnote, a hidden meaning inside of an overly-moralising or overly-general text.

It's hard. There's no good way of doing it, and I haven't had the opportunity. When Helen died, I didn't think that I'd have to write eulogies or anything, I just had my own sorrow, and that was that. Very few other people knew her in any way when she died. I'm sure most of the people in Conrad just moved on to a new town sweetheart when we left. Maybe I do owe them a visit. But either way, I think that doing anything, anything at all to preserve the legacy of the dead, especially if they were interesting when they were alive, or died without living a full life, is very important. I'm sure you have some experiences like that.

I understand fully how disconnected from death I must seem to you, and I do try and acknowledge that sometimes. But I don't let it get the better of me. Sometimes, if you acknowledge something too much, then you end up focusing on it too much, which can be worse

than if you didn't pay attention to it. It's like, I don't care if I trip and fall and hurt myself, and I could slice off a digit and it would eventually regrow. There are no consequences to my life, it seems. But, would you ever want to slice off your fingers? No. It's not something you do. It's like I'm just looking at everyone else with their one-use fingers and their fragility. It's terrifying. It's like I get vertigo from looking down.

Absolutely, that's the word I've been looking for. Like a satellite. Just above, looking down... no, looking *on* in awe, wanting to sometimes join in. But what I sometimes miss is that many, many other people would want to be up there with me, orbiting. Perhaps they'd want to be the only ones. I don't think many people have considered the consequences of immortality. But on the other hand, I think a lot of people unfairly dismiss it because 'everyone you love dies'. And yes, this is true. You will outlive all of your friends, you will watch them age and die, while you don't seem to get any older. Eventually, in order to avoid suspicion, you have to move town. I mean, I think I've had a good run, here. The last couple of moves were good. I liked Challis while I was there, but it just wasn't the same when I went back there and visited, as a stranger. Oh yes, many times. I do like to check up on these places, and see where old stomping grounds have been turned into strip malls, or endless suburbia. I don't resent it. To the people who live in those houses, they're having their own lives, they've got their new stomping grounds, their new experiences, and I do wish them well. That being said, there's something unshakeably inhuman about the new suburbs they keep cranking out. Ever since the 50s', I've always thought there was something wrong with them. I mean, I have nothing against the people who live there out of necessity, or even by choice, but I think that this cheap, cookie-cutter, dime-a-dozen housing just isn't right if we want to raise a generation of people with good experiences.

Oh, no, she never knew. No. Every time she looked in the mirror and said 'I've got a wrinkle', or 'My hair is falling out and going grey!', I made an effort to see if I could look older, too. I wanted to make the

effort to give her my best. My human best. Once, I chopped the end of my finger off with a knife, and I had to hide it for months while it grew back. Really messed up with that one - that is, if I wasn't immortal. But I still had to say that my finger was infected for ages, to wear a bandage around what I told her was 'a small cut' for months is probably the closest she's ever come to figuring it out. I hid it well. And I secretly hoped that our son would... well... I don't know what I hoped for. I did hope that he had immortality, but I never acted like he did. He wasn't old enough to get himself into any real scrapes, he didn't get sick or break a bone. But then I found out the hard way. The way that no one wants to find out.

After that, I thought that there might be some other people out there in the world who were immortal, or who just hadn't realised it yet. But where would they come from, since it's clearly a recessive gene, as demonstrated by me. Hahaha, honestly, I'm alright. I just look in the mirror most days and think 'Why'd I come back here? Why do I keep living within walking distance of my greatest failure?'

It does kill me. But, what I've come to realise is that the 'it' is me. It's me that wants to just curl up into a ball and do whatever to myself. It's the occasional sleepless night, wishing that I'm not immortal, I've just had a really good diet and am going to live for a really long time, but then I realise that just... doesn't happen, and I realise that my heart will keep beating, and the sun will keep rising, and I have to force myself to get out of bed. It's not like I'll die if I don't get out of bed for a month. I can live. In fact, it's what I do. I do live. And I'm telling you this important piece of advice. When I beat myself up for something that happened over three years ago, I realise what some people have done in three years. I take a look at myself, and I think I'm just wasting my time. And as someone with a theoretically unlimited amount of time to waste, I *still* feel like I'm just wasting my time. I have no idea how it must feel to not have that. I suppose it might be motivation.

One of the difficult things of immortality is that you don't have anything to work towards. You don't need food, or shelter, or anything that requires some kind of effort at all. It would take a handwritten

essay to get me out of bed in the morning if I didn't have something to do. I just want to be able to skip to the things I want to do. I don't want to have to live the lulls, I don't want to do any of it. But then, I think that's just wasting my time. And I just... go out and do something. Whether it's walking around the forest, making a mental map of the pathways as I go, or going over somewhere and just helping someone chop some wood for their fire, it seems like life slows down a little. And not in a bad way.

It's important, all this stuff. You might think that you'd act different if you had an unlimited amount of time, but you don't. You can act like the nights are days, and stay awake forever, and work until you feel dead, or do something you love doing for a decade until you realise someone else has beaten you to it.

Here's something I like to consider. Well, I don't like to consider it, to be honest, but I have to make myself think about this for a long time, every now and then.

I have been on this earth for longer than anyone else currently alive, and longer than everyone who has died. There are very few things which have lived longer than I have, and most of them are trees or possibly some deep sea creatures. When I was born, there was one set of humans. Now, they are all gone. They are all different now. The amount of people who have been born and died is immense. Yet, after seeing all of this happen, and unfold in front of me, and to have the time to process it over hundreds of years, I still have not come up with anything that can explain it.

I have not written something that sums up my history, my view on the world that is anything more than an easily-invented set of stories. Anyone can come up with this sort of stuff. But just having this kind of story isn't a special thing. There are diaries, historical records, drawings, tapestries, carvings, plays, exploration logs, and I have avoided the lot. I just can't seem to put it into words. So, perhaps, if I die, then it'll give me the... closure... that I need in order to be able to write this down properly. Now, I'm not writing as an observer on the human condition, I'm just a part of it. I hope that I get to live out the remainder of my days if I give the immortality to someone. I'd love to

be able to grow old. But, sometimes, I wish I had someone to not grow old with.

No, you wouldn't take anything away from me if you took it. I don't think I'd ever try and get back at you, there would be no point in trying. There's nothing I could do to make you give it back to me, except ask. No, I won't. I'm sure that you'd want to... actually, I have an idea. Let's quickly grab some breakfast and then I'll show you something.

It's something that I'm sure you'd like to see. Some... proof... shall we say. It's fine. I won't do anything too drastic. No, honestly, it's fine-ah, left here, it's a different path to last time. I wouldn't walk along the road if I were you, it's much longer since you have to go back and forth up the slope, and the view is much worse. Yes, don't worry, it's all good otherwise. The roads are sort of icy today, so hopefully they'll have thawed by the time that you have to leave tonight. It looks pretty warm. Just through this section here, there's the bakery, yep. It's quite a nice little alley.

Say, have you ever been shooting?

Soon

I haven't, at least not recently. Had an uncle who used to take me out with a couple of other young relatives. He was a little odd, though. I think my mother didn't want me going anywhere near him.

I have to say, that most towns of this size don't have this sort of thing. This is a really wonderful setup you guys have here. It's not going to move me here. What's the property prices like?

Really? I didn't think they'd be... ok, maybe *that* might move me here. It's mostly log cabins, right? What kind of amenities do you get? That's actually pretty good. Maybe I might move here one day, who knows. Might be really good. Might not, though. Might have to convince Mara of that one, and I think I might have used up all of my good favour of the past year on this trip.

It's not like I get a lot of time off of work, and I think that... perhaps, perhaps she's right about this one, maybe I was wrong to go when we could have spent time together. But then I think about the quality of time that we would have spent together, and then I just know that this is so much better. This, even up to now, has been much more productive for me than a week with her. Maybe even a month or so. Thanks, I really do mean it. And sorry, again, for earlier, I don't think you deserved it. I really, really don't. And I know I say it too much. I do beat myself up for things I do. Hopefully I'll have forgotten about this one in a year.

Anyway, what did we want to talk about? Also, I like the whole 'it's not important' but then following that up with a nonchalant 'have you ever been shooting?' Don't worry, I'm not afraid of gunning down a rabbit. I've become more annoyed with them over the years. For a while, we had one, but then it got out of its cage and it went missing. Pretty sure our whole neighbourhood is infested with the bastards now, after they... haha... after they bred like rabbits. Yep, I still have no idea how they kept living once they were out of their nice, heated home. The girls wanted another one, and that was probably the

closest I came to calling up Uncle Jim - the one I mentioned earlier. Then I realised he'd want to be paid in beer, and he'd have to stay over for a few months because his car is too cold in the winter. Actually, now that I think of it, I think he'd fit in at Liz's place. Now that I've thought about it for a few more seconds, maybe he wouldn't. Oh yeah, I suppose so, but I don't think they serve wild animals. They're more of a processed meat kind of people. Yep, as I said, as soon as they stop feeding me all of that crap, that's when I know I've become family. You wouldn't give your child extra maple syrup on their seven-stack of buttermilk pancakes, of course not.

Honestly, I think that that last sentence has really put me off having too much stuff for breakfast. Just look at this stuff. How do you guys get to make this stuff? Or is all of it just... waiting there, getting stale. I'm sure it'd still be nice if it tastes half as good as it looks.

I really do get sold on how food looks rather than what people say about it. Oh, yeah, I suppose I am. I didn't think about that. It's sort of... nice, once you cook it. It doesn't look like dog food. Alright, possibly cat food. Yes, I know there's not much difference, but as someone who's cared for every pet under the sun, I think I know my way around the various types of wet meat you can buy. Oh yeah, they love animals. Not enough to care for them in any sort of way, though.

I'll have... actually, you get me something. Surprise me. Show me what you guys have that I didn't already see. Oh, and if you have any bread, anything that's made here, then I'll have a loaf of that for the way home. I'm a fan of making my own sandwiches.

Right, so, as I was saying about the animals, it's just awful that they seem to want to buy a horse. Or possibly a pony. But you know what the worst thing about this pony is? There is, in my local area, a minimum limit on the amount of space a pony is allowed to have. We are *just* over that limit. That would have been the ultimate reason to not get a horse. As if I needed another one. Seriously, I do not want almost all of my spare income to be spent feeding something I know I'm going to put my back out shovelling its shit! I can't do this sort of thing for them, as much as I know it would make them happy, I know

that that would only be for a few weeks, maybe some months if they were otherwise occupied, but then, it'd become some kind of... some kind of white elephant. Something we just wouldn't be able to keep up. And I just know that every time I would try to sell it in a feeble attempt to recuperate the tens of thousands of dollars spent on this crap machine, they would suddenly act like it was their best friend, like they never left it alone ever, like they lived and breathed that gross smell they give off, and every time I would go to give either of them a hug, she would see how I would flinch away from them because of the stench, and then somehow bring that up in the future.

There is no escape if I buy a horse. Really, absolutely none. I would die in those stables. And they'd just forget about me, and then the horse would die too, and they wouldn't know for months. There'd be some funny little obituary in the paper, written by someone who had seen the circumstances of my death and nothing else. A whole life condensed into a tasteless pun in the bottom right hand corner of a tabloid newspaper. And I just know that they would say nothing. They wouldn't even laugh. For some reason, that seems worse than if they found whatever was printed to be funny. My final 'thing' in life, and they wouldn't even react to it in the way it was intended to.

Why yes, I do have a lot of time to think about this sort of thing. How could you tell?

It's just the kind of thing that I do when I'm sitting in the garage, and I can't hear the sound of the TV over the sound of rain hitting the roof. Moments like those are what make me who I am. I just sit there and think. I'm not coming up with some unifying scientific or philosophical theory or anything, I'm just sitting there, thinking about all the things I can do as a human to make my current situation less worse. It seems awful that I have to spend so much of my time looking at all of these options, to choose the least worst one, and then, after all that thinking, I still have to go out there and explain to them why they can't have a horse this year.

Not that I *could* come up with some unifying scientific or philosophical theory, though. I just need time to be able to think about this kind of thing.

That's actually a really interesting way of looking at it. You just chip away at the facets of human experience with nothing, not even a chisel. Can I write that down? Seriously, I like that a lot. 'All humans are equipped with the basic tools they need to tackle the problems of philosophy.'

I've never been that much of a philosopher myself, but I'd like to try one day. I think whenever I go over to the local library and pick up a copy of some college textbook - I have no idea why they let me lend it - how do they understand this stuff? I think I started reading this section on meta-ethics, and that was it for me. I just felt like I had nothing to add-

Sure, well... I guess so. But I would have to spend an awfully long amount of time creating and refining those opinions, and then I would have to go through the effort of getting them published, or at the very least written down on paper in a coherent way. I'm 55. I don't have time for this kind of thing anymore.

Right, sure. But, even if your age is really that - I mean, even you don't exactly know - then why haven't *you* done any of this? Right, sure.

So... what did you get for me? Right, right, that should be good.

Again, I'm sorry for this. I didn't mean to be incisive when I asked that, I really didn't. It's just something that I wondered, and, thinking back to earlier on, I think you must have answered that question at some point, in some way. Something about not being able to put thoughts to paper, until it's too late. Perhaps, even if you can't write about the human condition without being human, then maybe your 'outsider perspective' has something to add? Just like you said I would have in philosophy?

Yes, it is wishful thinking, yes, yes, but I don't think that's a reason to give up on it altogether. There is something to be had for your experiences. Actually, you know how you mentioned those diaries earlier? I think there would be a market for people who wanted them, who wanted original diaries from certain times and events. And I thoroughly understand why you wouldn't want to give them up. I understand why it doesn't seem right for you to have to give up something for it to then become a historical relic. But, to a certain extent, that has already happened. What happened to that guy... that Nazi guy from this town... what happened to his stuff? It's probably in a museum somewhere, or maybe just landfill. I don't think they'll put a diary in landfill. They'll just pick it up and put it somewhere. Maybe you can strike a deal with them where you're allowed to come in and read it.

Hey, at least it's better than keeping it in a cave that occasionally floods. Just think; temperature control, humidity control, they'll outlive you! Ah, hahaha, didn't mean that.

It's just such a *thing* that I say. It's a reaction. Something like muscle memory, that sort of thing. But still, even though you might not be able to access it very often, it's closer to you than it would be otherwise. There might be other people who read the whole thing, yes, but the *you* that wrote that diary is now so old that I'm sure that someone coming in with an entirely new set of eyes could figure out more about you than you could. You'd have preconceived notions of how you were.

Absolutely, just let the writing speak for you. That's the sort of thinking I like! Hahaha, no worries, it's alright. Well, I think that'd be a great thing to do next year. It'd be too cold to walk all that way at this time of-

I don't believe it. You wouldn't swi- *I* wouldn't swim over the Atlantic even if I knew I wasn't going to die? Why not just take a plane? Well, I suppose so, but if you have any sort of identification, like a driver's licence or anything, then isn't that already taken care of?

Haha, never underestimate the power of badly managed bureaucracy, oh, it will always come through for you in the most unlikely of times. Yes, well, I suppose that's the price you have to pay for being able to fly under the radar for so long. Besides, what would they do to you?

Ah. I see. Have you spent a long time thinking about *that*? Mmm hmm. Alright. I don't know what to add there. I would say you might have overthought it, but I think that the government might actually end up doing that. It just seems crazy how much of our budget is spent on the military. Imagine what they'd try and-

You have? I suppose that's what I'd do if I were you. I'd spend all week, all month, all year sitting in that garage. I'd transform under the light of that awful place - she'd be right. I would become a 'garage werewolf'. I've always liked that phrase. Even though I don't like the reasons why she uses it, I think there's a certain truth to it. Maybe it's the one *real* time that she has it right. I hope it is, too, because if she was right about any of the other things she says about me, then I would probably be fired, or in prison, or both. Probably both. Haha, I don't think I could go to prison but keep my job. Considering how much they like me, I'm glad that I survived a round of layoffs based on how much I like the drinks they have in the cafeteria.

Oh, nothing much. It's just something we like to joke about. One of the few things within the company that everyone seems to dislike. That is, apart from the boss. I wouldn't say he's an awful person, but he's so... fake. Everything is a facade to something else. I think it all became clear to us when he inadvertently revealed that he was having an affair with one of the staff members. He was married, didn't have any kids, but he was still married. He tried to justify it by saying his wife was horrible, and I sort of talk to him on my break quite often, we go outside and he chain smokes his way through a pack of Newports. He said all sorts of things about his wife, and those were the sorts of things I could hear me saying about my wife, but this seemed angry.

Yes, I'm pretty sure he did. Not sure if he was ever caught. I don't think he would have told anyone. It's not like punching her would have been anything to be proud of. No, really, it was obvious. He came in one day with - no, really - scratches on his face. He said it was a feral cat that he tried to get out of his kitchen, but then, since I knew where he lived, I just sort of turned my back on him in dismay. He lived high up in an apartment, not a penthouse, but high up. He used to talk about the elevators always being broken, or their attendants being slow or lazy, or whatever. It seemed slightly odd that a feral cat - you know, a street cat - made its way up several elevators, and past at least two attendants, and all to get into his apartment *how*? I never brought it up with him, since he seemed to genuinely convinced it was a cat.

There wasn't anything else to signify that it was anything other than a cat, no other bruises that he would have probably explained away. No, I just felt that everything he said carried an air of truth to it, no matter how obviously false it was. I think that's how he got to where he was. Not by telling convincing lies, but being convincing of anything. I'm sure if he had told me of the health benefits of eating raw sewage, I would have ended up trying it at least once. Yeah, I'm sure.

Oh, these look amazing. Wow. Haha, I wouldn't get this kind of service from Liz or Mara. It's just... I'd frame this if I could. Did you tell the guy to do this for me or is this something that they do for everyone? Oh, that's amazing.

Anyway, back to my boss. He just had this air of charisma around him, and I think that might have occasionally gone over into his personal life. What he wanted would have been best, I'm sure, there would have been no arguing whatsoever. Well, arguing that resulted in his wife getting what she wanted. And eventually, they just separated. He decided that he didn't want to go through the hassle of getting divorced, or anything like that, so he just decided it would be easier to give her some money and be done with it. I don't think he continued

seeing the girl from work. He became more shy and... somewhat distant from all of us? He's just become distant from most of us. Spends most of his day in meetings. He has his curtains closed. Fired his secretary and hired a new one.

To be honest, this way, he's out of the way more often, but all of us just wish that he'd explain why this all happened. To have someone as loud and ridiculous as him suddenly go quiet, it's beyond me. Also, I suppose, if I were to refer anyone else to you, if I don't 'pass the test', haha, he would be fairly up there on my list. Oh, I forgot he already came here. But still, I think he needs help, and that's not a thing that most other people my age would say. I think there would be a fair amount of this 'stiff upper lip' that the Brits keep talking about.

Oh, plenty. It's not just you, most people have trouble putting their thoughts and feelings into words. You know, most people, me included, dislike talking about feeling because even the word itself just sounds sort of... mushy. Like it's not a real word. But anyway, no, this has been very useful for me. Spending lots of time by myself has allowed me to realise what the hell I want, and what I actually need. The two are pretty well connected, to be honest. I don't wish for much, just to be free of all of this, and that's pretty much what I need. I suppose I have to make some more concrete goals for myself, otherwise I'll just spend the next forty years of my life aiming at nothing.

Yes, but only sometimes. Not often. Very much not often. It does feel sort of, nice, but in a sort of 'guilty' way. I think if she heard me, she'd just sigh on the other side of the door, and walk off, and think that I was crying because I had something to be sorry about, or something to admit. There's a certain... thing, in crying, that you achieve. I remember being able to count and list all the times that I had cried on one hand. I wasn't a crier as a child, I just sort of disappeared for a while and stopped doing things. Sometimes, I wish I could get back all of the times I decided not to do things when I just sat out of all of it for a few days. All of the events and things. Just

missed out because I decided to trawl through my self-pity rather than just cry.

Oh, I sort of remember. I think it was when my dog died, and the day after Rick died, and I realised that things wouldn't be the same. Yeah, it was like things had been cut short. Yep, we never met in the same way again.

There was a reunion organised, which I think went quite well, no matter how many of the people weren't there because they were in the county prison. Oh, no, I expected it. It was obvious. They did have it coming. I assume some of them used drugs, or sold them, and I think there was a local firearms racket which seemed like it made some of them a lot of money. Yeah, it wasn't right that the hick from school who used to walk eight miles across town most days from his trailer park is now a millionaire owner of a restaurant chain. I've been there once, he said to try it out and it seemed like it was pretty good. I just hope there isn't a shooting there. The staff seemed pretty happy. Hopefully nothing goes wrong.

I suppose not, really.

Oh, you want to... sure, I'll go now, did you- oh, they make the bags, too? I mean, is there anything you guys don't do? I have to pay for this, I can't just take it. Alright, if you insist. I believe you. Hahaha, no, really, honestly, just... it's fine. If you insist on doing all of these things for me, some part of me just has to try and say no. It's part of me. It's part of how I was raised, and I'm... I'm thankful for it, I think. It's nice to be able to say no to other people's generosity, I think if you say 'yes' too often, then you're just living off of charity, right? I suppose that might be some of the reason why I am who I am, but I don't think there's anything inherently bad in saying 'no' once in a while.

I mean, of course it's different if you're trying to split a bill, and you know the other person doesn't have as much as you, and you know it would mean a lot to them if they did pay, but it might mean that they had to skip their rent payment next week. I don't like forcing people into that kind of situation. It's nuanced.

Sure, we'll split it. That's what people do. No, I'm not saying that you're not people, I... hahaha, alright.

I don't know, to be honest. I think that in a past life I was from the U.K., or Canada. I mean, we are in Canada right now, so, maybe I'm just taking on the culture. Right.

Yeah, it has. Hopefully the roads'll be good by the time I get to driving home. It's not the end of the world if I can't leave tonight, though, the drive back to the airport is quite a long way, and I'll just call her if things aren't good. I'm sure she might understand. Of course, the way I've put it, you probably think she's going to chew my head off by the time I get home. You might be right, I don't know yet. I guess I'll just wait and see. Yes. Sure. I'll try. Yes, I'd already thought of that one. Too much time, alone, thinking.

Right, so what were you going to show me? Do you have a few shotguns or something? You seem to know your stuff. Hahaha, wait, have there been any people in the area that have been killed by them?

Sounds like he was lucky he got away. Poor bastard. Surely bears would know not to go for a man while he's his most vulnerable. You'd like to think that nature has some kind of... knowledge of this stuff. I think that animals are smarter than we give them credit for. That's how that goddamned rabbit got out of its cage. Still can't believe it. Just... chewed its way through literal chicken wire, I just feel sorry for them that they don't have dentists.

Oh, sure, I'm warm, it's fine. So, do you have some sort of thing that you keep them in? I'm actually pretty surprised that they're not in your own home. What if someone found or took them?

Ah, right, sure. But, even then, there might be people who don't know that. I'm sure you've had time to think about the whole thing, so maybe I should just shut up and just walk along for a while. Just...

Haha hahaha, I'm sorry. And sorry for saying sorry, too.

I Can See It

That's it, over there. I'm surprised you haven't said anything this whole time. Oh, right, of course, soaking it all in. I suppose I have to step back and think about what you might think about this, you city boy. This is a backwards place, hahaha. Did they tell you to set your watch back? They didn't say to set it back twenty years, I bet. It takes a long time for things to get out here. Apparently they didn't have electricity here until the late 50s'. Seriously, I know! I've heard things about the 'electrification' of the world starting in Cleveland, but it seems to end here. There aren't very many places anywhere else in the US, UK or Canada that I have read about that didn't have electricity until then.

This place was built in the early 60s', so it does. I mean, not that I need it for much, only a small light to see what I'm doing. It's not like I come out here at night, either, it's mainly during the day. Hunting during the night is... just a little bit strange. I can get it if you're a farmer, pelting shot at unsuspecting animals to scare them off, but for actually getting them properly, you need some real light. I don't aim that well in the light. I'd be even worse of a shot in the dark. Hahahaha, yeah, there's a... an unwritten rule there. Oh, that'd be even worse. Hahaha, I'm sure it wouldn't be. Some people who think they'd be all skittish around guns get much more sensible. I think that's the thing with them. If you're overconfident, then you just lose it, you can't hold it right because you're trying too hard, and you just look silly. Right, right, yeah.

I think you'd be quite good. I don't think you're someone who overestimates their ability, and from what I've seen of your ability to see little creatures out of the corner of your eye, you should be good at least aiming in their general direction. Does that reflex come from fishing? Yeah, I'd like to try it at some point. I think the river down in the valley is just too empty most of the year. I could sit there for hours and catch only one fish. Or nothing.

Oh, it's not like you'd be able to sit and read, right? You've got all of your concentration right on the fishing, there's no time for Chaucer. Not that I *like* Chaucer, but I don't think anyone would have the mental capacity to do both at once. Yeah, there'd be some kind of scale. No one who is very good at fishing is good at Chaucer, and vice versa. There is a tradeoff. You can't be good at both. I'm not great at either.

So, here we are, here's the shed, and it's full of all of my gear. I'll pick some stuff out for you. Here's a Remington, you might have heard of the name, that's right, eight-seventy, yeah. This, this is a Mossberg, and I can't remember the number, but I don't think it matters. What does matter is the fact that both of these have a significant amount of recoil, and I need to test whether you have enough... stick. Enough force to not just fall flat on your back. You ready yourself in the position you think is good, and hold this block of wood like you would a shotgun. I know there's not much in the way of a hold. It's just something I put together for when I take other people out. Don't want anyone to get hurt.

Anyway, right, I'm going to hit the block now, with roughly the same amount of force that you would get if you fired a shot. Ready? Right then.

Great, now, let's go shooting!

There's just a lot to hit here. Try not to go for any of the thin trees, they tend to break easily, and the big trees, it would just be better if you didn't hit them. Yeah, I know there's a bit of a slope, but when you think about it, your bullets fall anyway. It should be alright, I've managed over the years. Oh, and I would go over some basic rules with you about when to shoot and when to not, but I think you've got them down, already. Just don't shoot at me. I mean, not that it matters, but I don't really want to have to explain anymore critical injuries to anyone else. The less I have to pretend to go to hospital, the better.

So, the first... station we're going to walk to is just up the hill from here, and it'll give us a lovely overview of the whole valley. It's annoying that it's the first one, because it's usually the one I want to stay on the longest. Anyway, don't shoot at anything you can't retrieve, so there's no point in aiming for a buzzard all the way over the other side of the valley. Plus, you have a shotgun, so it's unlikely you'll hit it, and also it'd be a real shame if you did hit a buzzard. I'll tell you to not shoot at some things, so do be warned there. It's fine. You'll be good. No, it's fine, there really are a lot of things you can shoot. We've got too many rabbits, as I have said before, and the foxes that come along here are looking a bit scrawny.

I suppose it might have been at some point, but now I think the emphasis is more on the 'wood' part of Foxwood. Hopefully they'll come back looking nicer, but for now they're just awful. Really, they're the size of squirrels and have tails that are just sticks. They just don't have anything worth going for them currently. Oh, and another thing is that you'd think they'd be doing really well with the recent influx of rabbits here, but it's just not happening. They just don't seem to be breeding like they used to. Perhaps they've moved somewhere. I don't know.

By the way, the gun clicks open from the centre like... you know what, just give me it for a second. Ah, still not loaded... should have thought of that one earlier. Anyway, sure, you just have to sort of... jab it - right in the centre. I know I'm not being as exact as I could, but this is an art, not a science. Plus, that gun's getting a little old and has been beaten up by quite a few people before you.

On the left, there's a deer. Go for it if you want, it's nice and still and- ah... that's a shame, maybe there'll be- I think you got him actually. Not going to fall over off of that one, though. No sir. He will live to see another day.

Good one. Very close. Saw the bush next to it rumble. Seemed pretty close, right, yeah. Sure. It's not a lot, don't worry. I can see you're

trying to make each shot count and- got it! Lovely stuff, let's go and see what's left. Pretty close range tends to mean that you just get a mouthful of shot if you try and eat the damn things. It's just not worth it to get too close. Plus, you just end up obliterating them a little. Nothing left, yeah.

You're going to need some more ammunition at this rate, soldier. Slow down, and only go for the ones you're reasonably sure you can hit.

Now, if we move over here, you're going to want to do some- alright, that's pretty good, I saw that one. Right, I think that you're pretty good to just go on your own from here on out. You seem have gotten the basics down. Just saying, alright, just so you know that me not saying anything isn't just me waiting for you to stop so I can tell you off. I'm not that much of a teacher, and here, well, even if I was a teacher, this classroom is not filled with the most forgiving mistakes.

Good one. That's one for the animals though, it's too small to really... you know, do anything with. Nice shot, though, the small ones are much harder to hit.

You know, maybe that's right. Maybe it is wrong to kill these things. But, on the other hand, I'm sure that I've been doing this for so long that it's become part of the ecosystem, and if I were to suddenly stop, then there would be some massive imbalance which would have to correct itself. Same with fishing, sort of.

Perhaps not - oh, got one again, that's a nice one, you fancy some pigeon tonight? Oh, yeah, no, that's a pigeon, just not a normal one. You're probably used to wood pigeons and those scrawny inner city ones, but these are different. A bit bigger, a bit less brave when it comes to stealing food off of people. Oh, yeah, they're not endangered or anything, I know that because there's loads of them in the area. Of course, that by itself doesn't mean that they're not endangered, but I

keep seeing them in huge groups whenever I go into Edmonton or any big city like it.

Right, we're going to go to this new area now, but I think we should just me more quiet from now on. Try to avoid any of the small branches. There's just... Yeah.

Very nice.

Good, good stuff, I think that's worth picking up.

Are you imagining that this is your boss? Oh, no, most people do. Well, most of the people who I talk to do. No, I'm serious, there's a lot of people who would just - just like that. I sometimes think that maybe they're overreacting, but some of the things that I've heard seem to justify their beliefs. Honestly, it's really hard to put myself in their shoes, since I don't think I've had a boss for the last... I can't be bothered to figure out how long. It's just been so long since Ive had to answer to someone.

Oh, yes, no, I don't - there's nothing to pay anymore. I don't make any money. I don't have any real money. I've just existed for so long that none of their systems have kept me... up to date. I think there's probably some cupboard in the bottom of a vault which has some forged birth certificate on it. Yeah, the main reason why I've lived as I do is because I've had to just... move. Constantly. You can't sit still when you're immortal. I would have had to move to of this place at some point. Eventually, the residents just get suspicious. Currently, they all think that I'm just some sort of grandfather to a lot of people. That, or a drug dealer or some kind of covert businessman. A lot of people probably wonder what I do.

No, I don't think I could. There's just too much to explain if I do something like that. Right, sure, but I have to live here the rest of the year, as well. I'm not just here for the shooting, no matter how good it gets.

I'd have to move if I wanted to do something like that. Right, it just seems, too perfect that a stranger moves here, and then his wife and

child die, and then he doesn't age - I do hate talking about myself in the third person, but it's just... one of those times.

Probably in about five years, if nothing else happens. I don't think I'll stay here for too long. There's just too much that I'd have to explain, haha. You can only make yourself look so old before you have to start going out of your way to furrow your brow and dye your hair grey, or just shave it off.

Actually, I think it's quite interesting how over the past - good shot - over the past hundred years or so, long hair has sort of fallen out of fashion for men. I mean, it sort of came back a few years ago, but I think that there's a specific subset of people who like it. It's not as widespread as it used to be, where men would actively go out of their way to buy wigs, et cetera, just to make themselves look more fashionable. What is to come in the future? Is there going to be any sort of real changes to clothing? Are ruffs going to make a comeback? I hope not, bloody hate the things. Haven't really had any of the massively oversized ones on, but they're just silly. You look like some sort of bird. Just makes you look stupid. End of. No redeeming quality.

I think a lot of what used to make fashion acceptable is because it was hard to make and expensive, and people just liked showing off their wealth. Not very much has changed, but the ability to make things has. I wouldn't pay much for anything that's been made in a factory.

Right. Good one. That's one for the collection. Say, you're actually pretty good at this. Most people don't get this many on their first go. It must be those residual skills from your uncle. I guess now you might have one thing to thank him about.

Lovely shot.

Good one, just got him. Maybe that was a 'her'. Couldn't see the markings well enough. Doesn't matter.

Good stuff.

Tell you what, do you want to have a go on this one? It's a little better when it comes to actually aiming the thing. I don't think the sights work on that one. Well, they don't work as well, at the very least.

Right, so, can I have the ones you haven't used back and you can have these ones. The shot is slightly smaller, but since this one's a little bit more powerful, they still have the same... power, overall. It should be alright. There's not much in the way of extra recoil, really.

Right, let's just keep going. So, right, what else is bothering you that you'd like to pretend to shoot? I've got this whole target thing set up a ways away from here. It's like tin can stuff. But it's not rigged, like the ones that you get at the fair. Anyway, back to the point, anything that you feel is worth shooting? No?

That's interesting. Why do you think she deserves that if she's putting you through such an awful time right now? Well, yes, I'm sure that's the case. I- I mean, right, sure. I understand that you think I can't empathise with everyone else about death, but I have to worry about other people dying, as well as what might happen if I give my immortality away. Right. Okay, that's... so what about if she isn't scared? How do you know that she is scared of death? Have you asked her?

Oh, right. It's 'implicit'. In what, though? No, really, I want you to think about this for a good, long while, and realise that what you're thinking is not logical, right, you're wrong to think this sort of thing.

No, that's clearly, just... why would you even think that? Sorry, Daniel, seriously, I'm just judging you on your whole, train of thought there. You've gone right off the rails there. Not cool.

It's just that I think that you think that she's just like you. Maybe you don't know her. Maybe she's something else, but you haven't got to know her, you've just argued for the last few years. Oh, I'm sure those first few years were great, but she probably wasn't very mature. I mean, how can you mature when you're being coddled and funded by someone much older than- Hey! Woah, don't even tilt that thing

towards me. Oh, you want to test me? Right. Alright. Shoot me. In the foot. I don't want to have to hide a chest wound. In the foot. Right... right now.

Alright then. Do it. Now. Pull the trigger. Shoot my foot. This one, this one. It's not my dominant foot. Maybe you've seen me... oh, never mind. But do it. Trust me. Honestly, this is part of the experience. Did you sign a... right, right. I just know that it's okay. You know what the consequences of these actions are.

Right now. Do it. Pull the trigger. Nice and close. Nice and- you're not going to do it, right? I didn't think you could. You're too good for this. I'm doing this on purpose.

Stand back - I'll do it myself. Right, there we go, that'll do the trick. Nice and bloody. M- Mashed up right and proper, that is. Bloody hell-fucking- AAAAAUGH! Fuck! Should not have done that so quickly. Oh, god, ah, uh, I think I might need to lean on you if we go back, that's worse than I thought it was going to be.

No, I'm okay. It's okay. I'll be right as rain tomorrow. It's not a big one. I think I might need to have a nice long dinner with you, just to... keep my vitals in check. As much as I can do, that's all. Look, it's okay, you don't have to keep pushing your arm under my arm like that, I can balance on my own, I've done this sort of thing a hundred times before.

Do you just want to head back? I'm not really that much in the mood for hobbling all the way home. Actually, I think I'll head back to the house, and you can... just keep shooting. Bring all of your gear back to my place, not the shed. If you get lost, then just retrace your steps to the path. Also, you can practically see the town here for the lack of trees in the area. It's a good place, really.

Alright, be good. I know this is potentially quite a bad idea, but I think you're good for this. You're not overzealous. You proved that to me. If

you shot me in the foot like it was nothing I would have some concerns for you. Not just concerns for getting this immortality, just in general, really. Right, on you go. How many... right, you're fine. Ok, haha. I think it's funny that I'm asking you if you're ok when I'm the one who's missing an entire foot! Oh, shit, I think I just... that's the trick.

Yes, this is a bone. Don't know which one, I think it's splintered, then it's reentered my foot from me stepping on it. Good thing I wasn't wearing my best shoes.

Who Sees You

I'm back! Hey, are you here? Oh, good, that's good, it was fine, I didn't really want to shoot much after that. It was sort of horrible after you... shot yourself. Is that all fine, now? I mean, is it every going to be the same? Isn't there like, scar tissue?

Oh, umm... so... if your head was chopped off, would you regrow a new head or a new body? Well, I suppose not even the French liked the guillotine. You know they still use it? I'm surprised, to be honest. Considering they're usually quite good when it comes to ethics, they seem to be somewhat lacking in the capital punishment area. Now, the electric chair, that's something. Nice and quick, right? Like an electric shock from a power socket.

No? I thought it was... well, that's horrible. Really, like, really... I suppose that does make more sense when I think about it. But how comes that when people touch live electrical equipment, they just die immediately? Sure, right.

I just can't believe you'd actually *do* something like that.

What's the time, anyway, I feel sort of hungry, I think I'll be good for lunch. Oh, I've had a good few hours to think about that. Yes, I just walked around for the most part. I didn't pick up anything, I don't think I'd have the strength to haul a deer around for that long, haha. No, it wasn't because... oh, right, sure. I didn't know what you wanted me to do with them, that's all. Are we having pigeon for dinner? Well, I'm assuming that there's not much meat on those birds, right? Oh, okay, but... sure, sure.

And what *is* the time, by the way? It just seems like hours have passed. It's probably like- oh, really? Four? Already? I could have sworn that I... right, right. No, I just had a long walk to myself, and a long think to myself, too. Didn't walk back through the town because some people might not know who I am, and adding to that, I'm

wielding a shotgun. Not the best introduction. Hahaha, right, I suppose. But if this was in the city you'd get arrested. Yeah, it's a different world out there. Completely different.

Mainly just thinking to myself, not even talking for fear of being thought of as an insane rambler, holding a shotgun, ready to kill anything that moves. Oh, very. I didn't want to hold it as if I was going into a combat situation, but I didn't want to hold it loosely, because people might... it doesn't matter. I found out there was a strap clip after a while, but the strap wasn't on it. No, it was fine, I just... yes. Oh, of course, that was one of the first things I did. It's not like I can shoot myself in the foot without fear of repercussions. I mean, with a shotgun. I could probably get away with shooting myself in the foot with a regular gun, but it seems unlikely that I would be able to pull the trigger in either scenario. Yes. No, of course it's hard to do something like that. Apparently soldiers in World War One only shot themselves in the foot under the most dire of circumstances, in order that they would get sent home. And the bullets were just full metal jacket ones, not... shotgun shot! I don't know how you did that without... yelling more than you did. My ears are still ringing from the actual shot, more than the screaming.

Yeah, it might have been a good idea to have waited until you were closer to home to do that. I suppose it proves how little it matters, though. I'm totally sold on the whole immortality thing, now. Seriously, I'm just imagining all the possibilities of being able to live life without worrying about getting hurt or being sick, or even... anything like that. Nothing. Just, detached from it all. Well, not detached from everything, you get the point.

I just don't get how that didn't hurt in the slightest. Are you used to doing things like this for other people who come to visit you.

Anyway, what are we having to eat? I think it might be time for me to eat, soon, if I'm going to stay up all night, driving, and then I'll hopefully... stop for a few bites to eat along the way. I suppose that would be alright, but I don't think the soup will work with my driving. It'll just go everywhere unless I have a container, and even then, there's the problem of it getting cold. I mean, sure, right, but I think

cold food is the way. I'm not one for cracking open the hood and heating up a sandwich wrapped in tin foil on my engine. Not a good idea in my book, though I'm sure it could work.

Right, sure. Well, I think it's about time we went through how this whole thing works. I mean, when you give it to me, I mean, if you decide to, how does the whole thing work? I don't really have much of an idea. It just seems like... anyway, what else did you have in mind?

Sure, alright. Do you want to go out for a quick walk again - I'd just like to go out again, since it's the last time I'm going to be able to go out for a while. Oh, um, sure. Right. I'll drive, no, it's fine. I don't mind going down to the mine, hopefully the view will be different. I'll get my keys. No, I'd say I'm pretty good. It's not like my car handles badly, either. Haven't had to bang any dents out or sand anything down - yet, touch wood. You can never be too careful.

I suppose, but I think that's more about my mother. You see, she always had the same level of 'overbearingness', if that's a word I can use, but in a different sort of way. There's just this... indecipherable difference between the ways in which the two use their stare to get me to do things. My mother has a glare. That's undoubtable. But she always used it to make me feel like I was doing something wrong. And there was no two ways about it, if she was looking at you, she was looking at you.

Yes, for lack of a better word, she was pissed. Pissed off, pretty badly, most of the time. But the thing is, there was a clear distinction between the times when she would come out of the kitchen with a tray full of fresh bread, and the times where she'd come out of there with an oven glove, ready to smack someone on the head. I already told you about the time we went right down to the end of the peninsula-thing, right at the end of the Mississippi. She did things like that, too. It wasn't all fear. I think I've said too much.

Oh, no, she never really laid a finger on me. On any of us, really. The only time I ever saw her really lose her temper is after she found out that the next door neighbour's kid - who was a year, two years younger than me - shot my cat with an air rifle. The cat was fine, but I

sat in my room, listening out of the window as she gave this kid a piece of her mind. Maybe she was wrong to do it, since the cat was fine, but I don't think it changed much. I didn't see much of that guy any more, not that I did to start with, not to overdramatise, but I think she had a real effect on him, right, she just... I don't know. They moved away about a year later. It's not like we were good friends or anything, I think it was at the point in your life where you only socialise with people you see all of the time, you don't have to go out of your way to find people. You're just locked in a school with them, and sometimes, for some people, that's a good thing.

When I went to school, as you've probably heard, I was never around for long. I'd go home as soon as the bell rang, right up until a year or two before I finished. I do honestly, honestly lament wasting that time, all of it - right... right down the drain. I can't see it again. I can't go over and do anything. I can't overwrite them. And that sense of unchangeability is honestly wonderful. We have to sit and take responsibility now - while we can still change things.

Sometimes, I'm sure, but for the most part - probably because of where I am now - I don't think that I'd want to go back and do anything else. Oh yeah, I'm sure I've said that I'd like to, but that's usually because I haven't thought about how it would really be. Would I want to go back to kindergarten and not have to worry about work, or paying bills? I mean, sure, it'd be amazing, but I think there would be issues there as well. I mean, how often did I cry? Was my life really better back then? I just don't know well enough. I suppose, the closer you get to the present day, the easier it gets to tell whether you're going up or down. Right now, right this very moment, I'm going up. I've just had a great day out in the Canadian wilderness, and now I'm talking to what could be one of the most important people in my life. No, regardless of whether or not you give me immortality. I don't care. No, I don't... I do care about getting it or not, I just won't see it as a personal thing. I won't hold it against you. Why would I? I have much more to lose. I could spend my entire life holding this against you - but I won't. Why would I?

It seems pointless to hold grudges against people who are going to outlive you. I know that's quite a specific thought, but it takes me back to Mara's grandma. She was a lovely old lady when I first met her. She didn't ever change. But I do think that she thought I was responsible for her dog going missing. He went missing a little while after I visited their house for the first time. I don't know why, but that first time I saw her I was under the impression that she was one of those sorts of people who cooked and catered for everyone, she baked everything. How much more stereotypical can you get than having a pie on the windowsill of a shotgun shack on the edge of town? It's like they were waiting for some do-gooder to come along and make pleasant conversation with them.

Oh, I suppose that we all want those 'cinematic moments' so to speak, I remember a lot of times where someone said something and it just... made me leave a pause. Just like I did there. Just less awkward. Right, right. I think that that's an important part of life that a lot of people miss. Through the good times and also the bad. Like when I went all the way down to the bottom of New Orleans with my mom. Or when she picked me up from school with a new car and everything just... everything was just smooth. Or perhaps when I helped Liz out, when she was alone.

I don't like the fact that I can condense myself down so much. It makes me feel bloated when I tell all of my best stories to a new coworker, and then they retort with something more amazing, and they're... what, half my age? It seems like I've been spending all of this time doing very little. Maybe I'm just not a very good storyteller.

Oh, yes, I have plenty of practice. People are coming in and out of the place all of the time. I think someone has actually started telling a story about how much I tell the same stories over and over again. And all this time, I just wonder if Mara will ever know the things I know. All the thoughts I have accumulated are just sitting with me, mostly.

No, no, I appreciate the comment, but I don't think I'd have the enthusiasm to trudge through decades of feelings to come to any real conclusion. So what would I do? What would I write about? Oh, well, I suppose that's easier for you to say. You could start tomorrow, and

write detailed essays on all of your stories - using material from your diaries, all of these things - and then never run out of material. You could live another day, another week, and then come back home, exactly the same, and then write it all down. You wouldn't be missing out on as much when you stop to write things down.

I suppose, every time you're stopping to write things, you aren't living. Yes, of course, there are reasons for stopping every once in a while - but what I mean is that I'm not going to go out of my way to write up my life in a tome. I might wait until I retire. I think there'd be merit in that, right? I suppose so. But, I suppose I could take notes now? But even now, I don't think I can - right, sure, but that's a defining moment. The death of someone in my year was much more likely to affect me than the sorts of things I ate. I don't think paragraphs of ink saying 'my school lunches were poor' would really cut it. Sure, they might be able to relate to it, both Abby and Ares claim that their lunches are pretty bad. Maybe they'd be happy to know that I had it the same way when I was their age. I think there's a lot to that. Some sort of... multi-generational stereotype. I'm sure that my parents didn't have school lunches like me - maybe they were more like packed lunches.

I suppose there's a sort of universality to some human experiences. Some of them just don't change, right? I like that word - universality. Just seems good. Tried to teach Abigail it for English class, but I don't think she thought it meant what I told her it meant. Every time I read something new, in that garage, and pick up some new word, I have to force it into my daily speech. I have to make sure that they understand what it means for some reason. Sometimes, she looks at me when I use new words, like I'm doing something wrong. She thinks as soon as I'm given control of some obscure word that I'm going to misuse it. And, yes, maybe she's right. Maybe I have walked around showing off my capabilities in english when I was wrong. But I think that that far outweighs the simple, bored phrases she uses. I think that I wanted to be able to express my thoughts in some other way. I don't think that worked, really, I think I need to find some other way of doing things.

I mean, it's not like I'm going to stop doing that sort of thing. Just working towards continual self-improvement is something that I enjoy doing. It's the small things. No, really. When I get home from work, I don't just sit and watch things, I read sometimes, I've been trying to separate my work life and my home life, and also my alone life. I think I shouldn't spend too much time trying to figure this stuff out. I don't have time to. I should just work to solve them, not wonder how they could be solved. I should do more things than I currently do.

I'm sure everyone feels this way. What's *enough*? No, really. What would be enough for you? I understand that, not having to worry about certain things might change your opinion on this, but I feel that your input might help me find out what I might do if I had an unlimited amount of time.

Right, alright. No, I don't think that I'd really want to do things like that. I'm no puritan. I'm not as self-denying as my mom thought I was, haha. Look, I don't think I'd be prepared to sit down and just become a scholar. I'm not a scholar. I'm just... not, right? I never got the best marks in school, but I don't think that that sort of thing mattered. I think most of the things I learnt when I went to school I learnt in the playground. Yeah, I mean, I know you haven't been there or done that, but it's a major formative experience that nearly everyone goes through. This, this is why they say things about people who are home schooled! It's really... something. Now, I know how I said I can't remember about all that sort of thing, back in my early years, I wasn't exactly telling the truth. I can look back and remember quite a lot. But I can't remember how much of it is actually true. I don't know if any of the little lies I've told over the years has worked its way into my head over all this time. Do you ever wonder how many of the things that you think you did are misremembered?

Maybe I suffer from this problem because my wife sometimes makes me think that I've forgotten things, when I'm sure I haven't. I even say that with a sort of hesitation because I think she sort of makes me think that I'm forgetting things by myself. Maybe she's trying to make me forget that I forget. It's complicated.

Right, sure. I will make sure to sort it out. No, I've never thought that my life is beyond saving, not for a minute. But if I don't have to worry about the time that I've wasted, then I won't have to worry about the future. Oh, yes, I think that will be more painful, but by the time they head off and make their own way in the world, then I can just... go myself.

Oh, yes, I suppose. But I think if I am to be immortal, then that shouldn't... automatically remove any empathy that I have for others. I think that I would- *should* have to spend some time reconciling with her before I left. I couldn't just go home after this long drive, and tell her that I wanted to leave. I don't think, even without any responsibility to her, I could do that to the kids. I couldn't. That wouldn't be fair. But the way that she makes me look in front of them isn't fair, either. I can't leave my mark on them as the father who was never there for their graduation, or their first job. I was there for when they rode on their bikes for the first time, I was there for parties, celebrations, but always sidelined, forced to spectate rather than just live in the moment. I don't want to be that kind of person any more.

Oh, I told her that I was going on some sort of work outing. I suppose it doesn't really work for me if I come home after a four day work outing to the woods and say that I'm a completely changed man. But I suppose she won't believe me, pretty much regardless of what I say, or do. It's inescapable, I have to go up to her and confront her in some way at some point in the future.

Do you think you could help me write a plausible story? I... sure, I'd be happy to just take notes. I have time to sort out all the details in the car to myself. I don't think I'd have to tell anyone else at work about it, she never contacts anyone there. She never tries to. I've done things like this before, I remember when I stayed late at the diner, I'd always say I went out for a night with the guys from work, and it's not like she's going to go out of her way to find their phone numbers to try and track me down.

Oh, I'm sure. No, the fact that I'm lying to her is not helping us in the long run, you've already said that somewhere, but... there is really no other option. I can't just walk up to her and tell her that I really just don't want to explain what I do with my time to her. She would just rather I stay in the garage. There, I'm right there if she wants to do anything, if she wants me to do something, but just out of sight and out of mind the rest of the time. I don't mind it. I get lots of time to myself. I'm not sad about that, not one bit. There's not a whole lot of... no, it doesn't matter. Whatever you want. I'm no good with stories. Do you think you'd be able to explain why I suddenly came back feeling the way I did? Much less that I am an immortal? Well, if I were one - but still.

What would you want to do if you could do anything without having to worry about how you'd cover it up? What would you do if you gave up your immortality and then... you no longer had it? No, really, I'm being serious. You look about... my age, so you might live for another... forty years, at best. I'm trying to be nice, I don't know how this works. Look, what do you want to do? I don't want to take this away from you if you think you haven't got everything figured out. If there's still something you need to sort out, I'll wait, it's alright.

So, anyway, what's for dinner? I mean, for me to take away. I'd just like to know, that's all, nothing... personal. What did I do? It's not like...

Right, alright. I just think that the way in which we're talking is just too hostile. I'm used to hearing this kind of talk from my boss. Or people down at the fish market on a competitive day. I get it, you've... literally shot yourself in the foot, which is - to me, at least - sort of interesting, but in a morbid way. I mean, look, I saw some bone chunks sticking out of your mangled boots! That *has* to hurt, regardless of whether or not you are immortal. It's not like your ability to sense pain is gone, right? Sometimes pain is useful, no? What about if you accidentally touch something warm - you have an Aga! It's not

like that's going to be cold or anything. Alright, I'd just like to know some more about the details, right, just in case I...

It's not guaranteed. I know, I do understand, the odds are stacked against me - yes, I do know that no one has got it so far. But I feel that there has to be some kind of exaggeration on your behalf, no? You can't have rejected over... what, a hundred people? I think that you've actually seen far fewer people about this kind of thing. You don't seem busy, how could you have gotten through a hundred people in... in four years? Maybe it makes sense. But it's just, the small town, the lack of any 'on the grid' living. It just seems like there has to be something more to this, right? You don't have to take the bandages off, I believe you shot your foot, mister, I just don't...

I just can't come to terms with this. This, if you choose to offer me it, would be a life-changing decision, larger than any of the things I've ever done before, and will affect the way I live my life for the rest of my... I suppose I will have to find a new word for that. Existence? Life seems a... life seems wrong, it doesn't have that sort of... it just doesn't work. But I think that's a problem I'll have the time to think about, sitting in the garage.

Well, yes, I will go back to the garage at first- hey, it's not like I'm wasting my time, sitting in there. It's not like I'll have a finite amount of time, right? No?

Oh, that reminds me, the lights outside are working. They are pretty nice, they really make the place look more homely. Not that the wood walls and deep cushions don't already.

You Never Should

No, you do have a finite amount of time. You do, right, of course you do. You have a finite amount of time until you're forced to leave where you like living, like I will have to do one day. You have a finite amount of time until you have to pack up your bags and go. You have a finite amount of time until the people you love start ageing and dying - in fact, you have no time at all until that happens. The years go by faster and faster unless you keep doing things. You cannot stay still. I know that I said that thing about staying under rubble for thousands of years - that's a worst-case scenario. Don't think you can just sit on the bleachers for a decade or two. People will want you to do things. It is impossible to hide now. Things will get harder. Eventually, the only place where they won't have cameras is deep underground, or in the middles of deserts and rainforests. Is that really the kind of life you want to live? Constantly weaving in and out of places, having to make sure everything you own can be moved? Finding a cave that is your very own, just so you can store your documents? Having to forge identity documentation everywhere you go? This is not the kind of thing that everyone can do, right. I know I've said things like this before, but I think that maybe, just maybe, you haven't got the message so far. There's all this talk still floating around in that head of yours about 'if I get it' or... don't look at me so shocked. What did you expect? You are not an anomaly, you are somewhere in the region of my one hundred and fiftieth client. And there is nothing that makes you different from any of them. Take from that what you will - do you think you're smarter or less smart than the average Joe? Both of these have their problems. If you're too smart, you might try and get into some scheme with money, or something to do with gaming the system. I'm not about that. We're not gaming the system. All I want is to know that you won't mess this up. I do not want the people of this town to be investigated. I don't want the whole world yelling and crying in the streets, right, I don't want them

to know about 'the man who can't be killed'. I don't want the military to come and exploit me, I don't want to give my body to science, I'm not special, I'm just older than everyone else. There's not very much to that. Some of the oldest people in our world have nothing to give us. They just sit on their asses all day playing checkers or whatnot - and I just... I do not think that I want to end up doing that. Giving you this immortality is a huge risk for me. What's to say that you won't be arrested if they find my dead body? If they find out you came here when the interview the townspeople? Then, you might have to spend the rest of your infinitely long life in a prison. When you get old but don't die, then they're sure to ask questions. One day, you'll walk to the visitation booth and your wife won't show up. Not because she didn't want to come, but because she died. You won't know how your daughters live their lives, nor be able to care for them after their mother dies. Have you considered sending them money from a bank account that slowly gains interest?

Right, alright, you don't want to be doing that. No credit, no systems, no whatever. I'm not trying to be a luddite here, I'm just worried for whatever you might have in store for you. I am in pain now, I've shuffled too far and now the bone is... the bone is doing that thing again. Can you pass me the gauze, it should be in the cupboard under the... oh, yes, that one, right at the back. Thank you.

You know, this really means a lot to me. I think you listened there. I apologise for being harsh. It's just that... this might be a big thing. I always go through this, maybe it's just some mood swing caused by blood loss. Yes, most of the time, I shoot myself in the foot from slightly further away, but this time, I've sort of... obliterated it. This might take - a whole fortnight! Hahaha, this is really the worst I've ever done to myself, apart from a few sword wounds. But I don't really remember much about those ones, and the marks are pretty much all gone.

A quick side note about how the whole 'regrowth system' works, when your skin grows back, it grows back with your natural skin colour. So if you're out in the sun, working all day during the summer,

and then you get cut, then the whole area just goes back to being pale again. I recommend not going into farming. Oh, I'm sure it's not that big of a deal.

Would you like a little list of the things that I think are worth checking out? Sorry, I know you're not immortal, but this is just a useful list to have. Keep it in the letter for now, I'm going to need you to just hold on to that for me. Open it when you get home.

Oh, as for your dinner, I rang up the butcher and told him that you would be picking up some stuff on the way out, he's got a whole batch of meat for ya. As some sort of present. I paid, it's fine - you see, that's why the fee is high. You do get all of your money back, I promise. I don't need it, really. I can get by on charity. I work, sure, but it's not working for money. I work because Foxwood makes wood, and that's something that we've always done, to a greater or lesser degree. I go out and help out with things, just things that people need doing. I drive over to the larger town about twenty miles up the road so that this old lady can get some things she needs. I do this because I have all the time in the world, I can live through other people. I can experience the world while working towards hazy goals, I don't need... I don't need to do things for myself. I can go without eating, I tried to say that was a good thing, but sometimes, one of the greatest human experiences is eating, and one that I definitely wouldn't go without. I wouldn't skip the pain that sometimes comes with getting sick, or going to the bathroom after some bad food, I wouldn't miss any of it, just because it's so... wonderful.

When I wake up, and I check my answering machine, and, as usual, the only messages are from people like you coming to see me, I think I have all day to just exist. I have to exist through another day, you see, I have to do something to get me through that. Over the years, I've come up with some sort of a philosophy, something to get me through every day without becoming a ghost. I have to do one thing every day. One. Whether it's go out for a long walk to somewhere I've never been before, or speak to someone in the bakery, or go and chop some wood, or tend to my wife's grave.

I know, it is a little odd having her grave there. But it's not like her body is buried there or anything, she was cremated, and I scattered her ashes here, and over the outskirts of Conrad. Conrad was beautiful there, the town just looked like it was beautiful. I don't know what was so alluring about it, it just seems like somehow, even though not much has changed, while driving through I still saw the old post office, it just seemed that everyone there was alright. Some of the kids that I had taught how to read would have moved out of their parents houses by then, or at the very least, gotten jobs. I don't think I recognised anyone there, not surprising, to be honest. I suppose Conrad is just one of those town where people don't stay. They just drift through there, floating in and out of the highways whenever the wind picks up. Maybe starting a family, maybe deciding to fall in love for the first time.

I still can't believe it's the first time I really made a family. Over... what, more than three hundred and fifty years, and I hadn't settled down with anyone at any point? Oh yeah, it is odd, I believe you, I think that whenever I think about this.

I suppose that maybe I think that a lot of my life has been a series of recurring themes. Maybe that's just me romanticising life. Sometimes, whenever I see those lampposts, the old-looking ones, I have the same feelings as I did the first time I saw them, the old English ones, struck by awe at how man had conquered the darkness in such a way. Candles and lamps are one thing, but these were shining beacons to the ingenuity of man. The detail that went into every one, yet, the mass-produced nature of it all. Not to mention all the subterranean gas lines, which, at the time, we thought was just pure magic. I read about the invention of the underground a while after. People climbing into the ground to get places? It seemed like something that moles would do with their tunnels, not anything on the scale of humans. In fact, I'm pretty sure if you go there now, it doesn't feel like being underground any more. It's all spacious, with tiles making it feel more

like a basement bathroom than a... a big old tube that you get in to get yourself somewhere.

Yes, I think there is a lot to be said for the design of places like these. What do you think about the future of how people will get places? I've never been a fan of the whole 'flying car' idea. Do you know how much time it takes to become a commercial pilot? To even get a licence for flying yourself? It's not easy. I've never tried, but I've known people who have. It just seems like you have to may hundreds upon hundreds of dollars just to have a go in one to see if you're any good at it. I don't get it. I just like flying in them. I've only really ever been on two flights. One to go back from the US to the UK, in the late thirties, and another to go from Washington to Dallas. I wouldn't dare try and go there again, too much paperwork, they'd probably throw me out. It's not like I have a passport any more or anything, it's probably turned to dust somewhere. I don't have a social security number. I don't even pay taxes.

It's not because I want to, it's because I have to. Besides, it's not like I make enough money to warrant me paying any tax. I spend most of the money that I get on maintaining my own house, and what I don't generally just goes right back to the bakery. Yes, I do spend too much time there, I talk to the guys a lot, I know. They're good people.

I think that most people are redeemable. You know how I talked to your boss, I must have mentioned that at some point - and yes, I know how it's technically 'bad practice' to tell you that I've spoken to someone who you know, but I think if you know that he's spoken to be, you have to go and tell him. That seems fair.

But what I want to tell you is that this man is not as happy as you think he is. All those ideas you have about him, all those little things about how he is now that he's divorced - a lot of them are true. He may have everything that you guys want, all of you and your friends, but there is no replacement for losing someone that's close to you. I know this. You might know this, your parents might, too.

Again, I hate to say things like this, but he is a human as well. He's going through everything you are, he is part of the human condition. That's a Sartre thing. Do you know anything about him? Oh, that's

actually... that's fine, you know what, I'm going to go and get one of his lectures out, I've got it in a compendium somewhere. Follow me.

I should really sort these things out more. That's why I quit my job doing the filing for the town hall - just too much time consuming nothing. I mean, what are you doing that you couldn't tell a monkey to do? One day, we'll have robots to do this sort of thing. Just you wait. Here we go, I think I've marked the page, somehow. Do you fold the pages over or do you have, I don't know, a pencil or something like a bookmark? Somehow, despite all my reading, I've never been a big bookmark fan.

Here it is. *'The European of 1945 may be striving out of a certain situation towards the same limitations in the same way, and that he may reconcile in himself the purpose of the Chinese, of the Indian, or of the African.'*

Don't you just... I think it's a good piece, anyway. I've been all over the world and seen these things happening. I've been to tea plantations, I've seen people struggling to get by in Middle England, and I think that up until very recently, we were all working towards one or two things. Self-sustainment or eternal salvation in the form of religion. Since then, I think that most people in the West generally don't have to go out into the fields to work the land to feed themselves and whatever lord they're working for, but generally that's taken care of. And as for religion, that's been declining somewhat. How could a god, any god, let something like the holocaust happen? Or all the suffering that goes on, all over the world, especially in the Soviet Union? There's lots of people who claim they have found an answer, but most of the time, I just think they're trying to make excuses. I am not, by any means, an atheist, but I think that trying to absolve the creator of things which eventually became bad of his creations is just wrong. If you get what I mean. Don't worry, here's something else I've found from this.

'Man makes himself; he is not found ready-made.' I like this quote a lot, I feel it's kind of funny in a way, since we tend to buy ready-made meals at fast food places now. I don't think by any means it was intended to be a comment on consumer culture, it was first said in Paris in the forties. I don't think they had McDonalds there, back then. I don't think they'll ever have it. I don't see the French giving in just yet. Hahaha, well, I suppose they'll hold up better against the Americans than the Germans. They've got an ocean to cross.

Imagine a battleship with hundreds of Ronald McDonalds on it. Wow. I'd be scared. I think I'd just give in, they look... just... inhuman. I wonder where they come from. That's a good idea, albeit horrible. A whole land of these creatures. Can't think of anything worse myself. But the quote, what do you think of it?

I think that's right. We don't have a human nature that we can lay back on, we don't get through the day by virtue of getting through the day, we have to actively move through it. I moved on after... all I've been through. I've told you all about it. I'm okay with what is going on right now. I don't ever really get in my car and think to myself 'Right, time to never see Foxwood again.' I could do that if I wanted to. I could do that, no doubt about it.

But I don't. What's to stop me? I mean, really, what's to stop me? I am sorry for... for offloading these questions on to you, but it's because I haven't found a good answer. There is no reason not to leave what you're doing at any minute, and I think that's because there's no underlying reason for any of this. When you look at what you do, you must, surely, at some point think - wow, why am I doing this?

Yes, even if you're working towards money, isn't money... strange? I grew up in a system of bartering so I think I might find it weirder than you do, but having little paper slips and coins be the things that most of us live our lives over? It's weird. They don't have any intrinsic value. They're not rare, they're not a material like the ones that we dig up from the ground, we could just make more of them if we wanted. It's just strange, right?

You can pick anything you like apart with this system. having dinner is strange - placing pieces of animal and plant in your mouth so your body can rip it apart and take the nutritional value out so that you can keep on living? It almost makes more sense that I'm immortal. It isn't intuitive that humans use up energy - where's that energy coming from? I don't see any sparks, hahaha, it's just strange. I understand that the more you know about this sort of thing, the less strange it becomes. You don't need a 'God of the Gaps' to figure out the world anymore. Some of the time, maybe. Do you understand anything about quantum physics? I've had longer than most other people to absorb it, but that doesn't make any difference to how much I understand it. I still don't get it in the least, and to be frank, I don't think I ever will.

It's alright if you haven't ever done that. It's okay if you haven't stepped back from reality and just breathed in. Come at the world from an outsider's perspective. Look at things and try and break them down to their bare essentials. This is what you have to do if you are to be... well, not if you are to be immortal, but if you are to be a good immortal person. Now, I'm going to do a few things, and I want you to see how you would describe them from, umm... the point of view of an alien who knew little about humans. That sort of thing.

Alright, that was good. I like the idea that you thought the alien wouldn't understand that the temperature of the fridge is not the default temperature, it was... evocative. Not quite the thing I'm looking for. I'm more steering towards any insight you might be able to glean from looking at things from an outsider perspective, remember? Right, ok.

Well put. I like that. It is weird that we have some things that are virtually identical, yet we treat them in such different ways. Oh, do you want the beer I got out? Or the wine? It's pretty good. Right, sure. You can have it for the... maybe that's not the best idea. Have it as a gift. Don't let it get too warm though.

Ok, so what I want you to do when you get back home is do that. Try and see things from that strange perspective. I know I'm saying that a lot, but it will help you get along with your wife. It might be able to sort things out, whether or not you get divorced. I'm saying this because a lot of the situations in my life I have been able to resolve have been helped along by this process. Think objectively, as if you were a judge watching this in court proceedings. If you think he would take the side of the other person, then cede the point. Admit you were wrong. Oh yeah, that's another one of the things that you should take with you. Admitting you did something wrong really helps.

I know this isn't the most specific advice, but I don't know the specifics of you and your wife. I'm not here to make you into a different person, I'm not here to reform you because you need to be reformed. I'm here to help you live your life *as if* you were immortal. Eighty years, while probably not enough for some people, they waste their time on all sorts of things.

And I get it, it's hard, it is hard to use up every second of every hour, but... I can't say it gets better. It *is* hard. And sometimes it just *doesn't* work out. You don't get what you want. You probably won't get what you want from immortality.

Nothing Much To Lose

Daniel sits back in his chair. “I understand. No, I’ve had time to think about this myself. I think there’s a... a point where you just have to accept that. But, I think, with immortality, I could rise above that, I mean, think of all the things I’d be able to do! Think of all the things you are able to do! I honestly, truly think, right now, immortality is the best course of action for me. The... the logistics can be figured out.” There is a small pause, the length arbitrated entirely by him - the immortal man isn’t going to provoke him into speaking this time.

“I just want out. As much as I care about them, as much as I love my girls and my wife, well, maybe not the latter so much, I just... I just think that my life would be better with it! I could drop everything, *everyone*, and I would be able to spend the time doing what I wanted to do. I would be free to spend more time with them.” he continued, leaving enough conversational space for both a further comment on his behalf, and a response from the man. The momentum of his exasperated speech dwindled as the man seemed to prepare a response, and then falter. Wanting to keep things from stalling and falling apart, Daniel tried to interject again.

“I cou-”

“You know-”

Two false starts. A verbal collision. He tries again.

“I’d be-”

“Sorry.”

This time around, Daniel is given room to speak. He had won, if you could call this something that has states of ‘victory’ and ‘loss’.

“I’d be able to do...” he starts, expecting a fully formed sentence to follow up, without any thought. His mind turns to how he had

forgotten what he could do because of all of the conversational confusion. In the absence of a proper response, the man picks up where he left off.

“This is no sales pitch. I am not selling you a product. I am not dealing with you, or trying to get you to take away some unbearable curse. You will not get what you want from me. Immortality is not the cure to all of your ailments. But go on, tell me what you’d be able to do.”

Daniel reluctantly rules out reasons for his inability to recall one of the most basic things he had come here to tell the man. Why does he want this? Why did he want this? He’d even written some of the reasons down on the back of a hotel notepad he had picked up some time ago. Where is the notepad? In his car. With all of his other things.

Slowly, the pause increased once more, and then, with a considerably rehearsed slump, the man falls back into the chair he had taken. The seconds mount up, but the man isn’t getting any response. At points, Daniel lapses into thinking in the present - he keeps trying not to think about how things were absurd.

“I suppose you could call this absurd.” he says, hoping secretly it was part of some hidden test the man had for him.

“I don’t really care all that much.” said the man. “What would you do?”

Not wanting to waste a second chance at getting the ball rolling again, Daniel said, “I suppose I would have to figure it out as I go along. That’s what you did, right?”

“I don’t think that we’re talking about what I did. I didn’t know that I was immortal. The circumstances are very different.” said the man. “Now, go on, what do you want from immortality?”

His mind has finally scraped together a shred of half-remembered scribbles from the notepad.

“I’d like to be able to love Mara again, and I’d like to be able to see my kids more often and actually... actually care for them, rather than just living on the sidelines.”

“No, what do you want from immortality?”

“What do you mean? That’s what I want from immortality.”

“No, I’m asking what you want from *immortality*. Those are just things that you want. You told me you wanted them before I had even indicated the slightest amount of interest in giving you my power. You said you wanted to be happy again.”

The man gestures to his surroundings.

“Do you want to live like me? I know I’m comfortable, and have a roof over my head, but there is nothing that I can do that you can’t.”

“But you could fall off a-”

“Fall off a... fall off of a building? You can do that, too. You might even be able to survive that, thanks to modern hospitals. Even if you don’t, you can still do it once. Besides, what’s there to stop you from jumping out of a plane with a parachute? That’s... that’s much better than falling off of a building. You get a lot more time to move around, and, from what I’ve heard, it’s sort of fun. Less fun if there are enemy troops waiting for you, though. Maybe this sort of thing might be fun to do as a hobby. Probably a bit dangerous. So, what would you do? Sit around and read books forever? Don’t tell me you will. You won’t ever read enough to become an expert in any field. I’m not saying that you can’t, you very much can, but you won’t, and I’m just saying this to ground your expectations.”

The man takes a small breath and continues.

“I’m lucky. I’ve had the people closest to me die and I haven’t been as sad as I ‘should’ have been because then I didn’t have to explain anything to them. Of course, they could have lived to eighty, and that would have been fine as well, but this works. It works. I’m okay with how things are going for me. But I don’t think you could keep your lifestyle up. I’m alright with not seeing many people for weeks on end. And that might not be how I’ve become, but maybe how I always was. You seem to have spent your whole life around people, and that’s good. But you’re going to have to give that kind of stability up. And I don’t think you can. You have people to see, and a job to keep up! It’s not like you can travel the world, doing what I do, because you have to be able to pay for these things! I get by because I lived in times where you didn’t have to have money to get by. I’m used to a subsistence lifestyle, at least, partially. Every day, I regress further away from a society that wants me to be part of it and a past that is no longer feasible to rely on. And this regress... it goes along with me, I don’t want to ruin anyone’s life.”

Another pause. Daniel subtly expresses interest in making a comment, but he stops before anything starts.

“I don’t want to spend the last years of my life - if I get any - wasting away in front of a television set, waiting to see the day on which one of the guys I give immortality to commit a horrible shooting with no fear of death. This is why you might think I invite all of these people here. To screen them out. I’m assuming you thought that.”

“Yes, yes I did.”

“And when I told you that I had seen hundreds of people before you, that didn’t change your opinion on how likely you were to actually be... you know, the one to get this thing? You knew several of the people who had already been here! Did they refer you because they

thought you were somehow *less* fucked up than them? That you might become immortal? Why would anyone tell anyone else about this?"

"I... I don't... know."

"You were just glad to be invited. To think you had some sort of second chance. Well, you're wrong. You're not getting this. You're not getting this until you figure out what it is you want." Daniel sits in silence, still in a mix of awe and despair at the orchestration of this scene.

"Go home, and figure out what you want to do. Then, come back to me. Take a year. But when you do come back, you'd better have a good list of reasons why I should give this... power... to you. A good list."

"What sort of things-" says Daniel, interrupting himself after realising that this was a question he was supposed to answer. He puts his hand up, and continues, "Ah, no, that's for me to find out, I get it. Right."

"When you come back, I want your affairs in order, I want your life to be sorted so I can give you what you want. A year. A whole year, preferably to the day. Gives you a goal. A sort of resolution to work towards." The man stops. "Three hundred and sixty five days. It's not a leap year, time is short, hahaha."

He stops again, almost waiting for an interruption. Nothing.

"If you don't feel like you've done enough, just wait another year. It's alright. I won't blame you. Things take time. Spend some time with your kids as they go off to college. Take five years. Ten years. But just remember, always to the day. Near enough will do, just call me. There *are* other people around. Not many come back this time of year, though. Something to do with... actually, I think people just hate driving in the cold. Or the snowdrifts that envelop the highways that

get you here. Plus, for a lot of the people who visit me, it's a flight, then a bus, then a rental car, then they have to deal with me."

Daniel loosens up, the slightly painful part of the conversation over. The man winces slightly as he stands up again, the stump of his foot still bleeding, but less heavily than when the conversation started. He then hobbles over to the kitchen counter, and puts a new set of bandages on. Daniel glanced over and immediately wishes he had looked for longer - only the general viscera of the foot was visible; none of the gory details. The man finishes with the bandages, and places them back in the cupboard, which Daniel now sees is full of similar bandages.

"He must do this a lot." he thinks to himself, getting up to join the man over at the counter. He also spots a few jars of pills, and wonders why the man needs them. Nothing much comes from this wondering, because now they are both standing face to face, the man pointing to the fridge, implying that Daniel should move out of the way.

"Sorry there, just going for the fridge. Say, Daniel, I really can't believe how quickly you pointed the gun at me after I started to... rile you up." The man grabs some sort of drink out of the fridge, it is partially frozen. While stirring it with a finger, crushing the icy chunks, he continues.

"I just think that maybe that sort of behaviour is something you need to work on. You could not do that with a non-immortal person. Not even as a joke."

"I did that because I knew you wouldn't die."

The man hesitates for a second. "Really? That piece of paper... the thing that you had to sign. Did you not read it? I will hold you accountable for any damages that you cause to me. Unless I say you can. Like I did. Because, at least, according to the law, I am a regular human being. There's nothing stopping me from seeing"

Daniel attempts to look like he knows everything that the man just said. He didn't, but he subtly hopes that he didn't mean to point the gun at the man while also forgetting he was immortal.

"The only reason why you pointed that gun at me was because you thought I was a threat, and you thought that that gun would remove that threat. You've forgotten that I'm immortal at several points during these last few days, you pointed that gun at me despite barely knowing how they function. And you did it after... probably less than a minute of me talking about you and how you might be a flawed person. I hope you realise what you've done."

Daniel stands there, close to going on the defence, but he immediately realises it's just not worth it. "The man has this all rehearsed," he thinks, "he's going to win because he's seen hundreds of people just like you."

The man picks up again. "I don't want you to feel guilt. I want you to understand that everything that you do here, everything that you do to me, is anger, directed at your own mortality. I'm... well, to a lot of people who come here, I'm a representation of how you will inevitably die one day. And a lot of you can't accept that it's someone else, even after they tell you that the burden of immortality is hard to bear. And the whole idea of 'I don't know what will happen to me after I give this to you' is usually glossed over. I could end up dying. And I know I've had 'too long' or some other contrived phrase, but it's... it's... you'd still be killing me. And I know I invited people here to try and give this thing away, but I can't shake the fact that I think that nobody takes that into account. They just think that I'm desperate to give it away. Desperate. Well, the hundreds of people who have come before you would say different."

"Ok. That's... ok is the wrong word. That's right. That's just right. I understand what you're doing. Not in a malicious way, I understand what this is now. You just want me to use this meeting as a constant reminder of how I should and shouldn't act."

“There you go! I’d say it’s more... therapy. You’re supposed to go home, and sort things out for yourself. But always remember this. Even if you take five years.”

“Remember what?”

“This.”

The man lifts his leg up to show Daniel the bandaged foot, which is still just as mangled as it was, ten minutes ago.

“This is what you’re going to do to death itself. You might not be able to beat it, or live a hundred years more, but you can do that through other people. People will remember the things that you do for far longer than I have lived, if you do something to change the world. Even if you don’t change the world, you have stories to tell your children, who will then tell their children, who will then... you get the picture. It’s only when someone remembers you for the last time that you really die. I have spent my whole life living so that no one remembers me. I’m pretty sure if I were to leave for a few years, and then give my immortality away, I would die my second death right there and then. No one would remember me. I don’t want to give you my power, just for you to use them as I have done. I don’t want to see another person spend another hundred years learning as much as some people do in a decade. Or less! Much, much less.”

“Alright. I’ll try.”

“You don’t have to be a garage werewolf forever. Just look at things as if you were me. From that alien perspective we talked about earlier.”

“Right. Ok, well, should I go now?”

“You’re free to go whenever you like. You were free to go anyway.”

“I think I’m going to head back now, to get back at a reasonable hour.”

“Good thinking. Right. Oh, don’t forget to pass the butcher’s on your way back. Tell them that I sent you.”

“Ok.”

Daniel looks around, he goes into the guest room and picks up his things, and packs them hurriedly into his briefcase. He thinks he is underprepared for the journey back, as it’s starting to snow. He comes back into the dining room, and enters the kitchen on his way out. The man nods, and says goodbye, after shaking his hand.

Daniel closes the door and walks out, past the plants and the soft orange lighting, presumably sodium lamps - although he does not know this. He slows down to look at Helen’s grave on his way out. The door opens. The man looks out, and smiles. He speaks, and raises his voice a little.

“You’ve got some pigeon and beef. Maybe the butcher might have thrown something else in.”

Daniel nods, and waves back, and takes a flower out of his pocket that he had picked up during his shooting, and places it next to Helen’s headstone. The man has already closed the door.

He then walks to his car, and starts it up, noticing that there is a note stuck in the window. ‘Remember to think.’ it says. He gets into the car. There is a note wrapped around the steering wheel. It says the same thing. He looks at the gearstick. Same thing. His wiper blades have a note tucked in there as well, and he goes out to remove it, placing it in his jacket pocket. There is already a note in there - ‘Remember to think.’

The car won’t start. After a few attempts, he goes to the bonnet to inspect the engine. There are many notes there, all labeled ‘Remember to think.’ He removes them all, except for the ones deeply wedged in-

between the components, which he assumes will just have the same message on them. He is right, but doesn't know it. The battery has been disconnected. He connects it, and the car starts when he tries again. He drives off, past the sign at the end of the gravel track that leads to the house. The other side of the sign is painted with large letters.

'Remember to think.'

New You

Oh, it's gone to answer phone. Umm...

Hi, it's me, Daniel, from a couple... quite a few years ago now. You might remember me as the guy who... well, I'm not sure what you might remember me for. The girls aren't in right now, they're at college, a good one, too, though I don't suppose you really care. I was wondering if maybe I could come back to schedule an appointment? I've been thinking about this for a good long while, I've talked it over with-

Oh, hello? Is this one of... one of Alan's clients?

I think I am, yes, why do you ask? He never told me his full name. Oh, tell him I liked my... pigeon. Since I last saw him, I've eaten pigeon to death, I can't stand it anymore! I've had so much. Tell him my uncle started giving me more to... uh... fulfil my desires, haha. I read his letter, too. It was quite good, I'm thinking of going to the Appalachian Trail at some point next year because of it.

Right... you see, Alan... has passed on, around three years ago. I'm sorry for you to find out like this, I'm sure he would have wanted you to meet him one more time. Thanks for calling us.

Us? If you don't mind telling me, who are you?

I'm his wife. Helen. He might have used me in a story. I've had some others say that I was this wonderful woman.

Yes, he told me you were dead. He went on about it for a while. He seemed to really get into it.

Well, that's Alan for you. Always making up these stories. As soon as I leave for a few days, he starts making up tales of how I died. Typical, haha. Typical.

And... alright. If you don't mind me asking, how did he die? Did he give his immortality away?

No, he didn't. He died of complications related to his heart disease.

So, he was never immortal?

Yes. He was never immortal.

Right, that makes sense. But what about the foot thing?

He doesn't have a left leg lower than the knee. He got... he got very good at disguising it. Oh, he had lots of old shoes, and he would take meat from the butchers to make it look gory. A true showman, haha.

Uh huh.

Happened in a forestry accident, by the way.

Oh, right.

If you don't mind me asking, how many of the stories he told me are true? The 30s? All fabricated stories? The car crash?

Oh no, that's a true story, it just didn't happen to him or anyone he knew. He found it in a newspaper archive and thought it was interesting.

And the story about... about your father?

Partially true, although the Nazi thing wasn't true. I think he mentioned

that to almost everyone. No, he abandoned the Germans in around late 1940. He may have been a bit of a coward. He was a good parent, regardless of what he did. I don't see him as that kind of person. He didn't look ruthless. 'The Silent General' was his nickname. Because he was quiet. Not ruthless, just quiet. And he wasn't a general, for all I remember. He didn't like talking about it.

That's really interesting. I just want to know about his life, what he actually did. Did you really meet this man and bond over books?

Oh yes, yes we did. Some of the best times of my life. He probably romanticised it a little. He liked to do that. I suppose that's why he was able to convince you he was immortal.

I suppose it was.

Oh, the thing that he told me to tell everyone like you who calls is this - remember to think. Have you been... doing that?

I suppose I have.

Good, good.

...

Is it possible for me to come and talk to you?

No, we're moving soon. Our daughter is going to a bigger school.

Oh, right. Right.

...

Tell me this, how much of his whole story is true? Just... I'd love to know where he came from.

I don't know. How much of your story is true? Hold on a second... what's your name again?

Daniel. Daniel Trahan.

Ok, Daniel... Daniel, Daniel... Daniel! There we go. Right. He had a few questions for you on your return. Did you lie to him about any of the stories which you told him?

Probably, yes. I think I told him the mailbox story - Mara, he might have remembered that? We very sharply split up after I came back, and the judge ruled in... in my favour. I may have exaggerated parts of the story though. But he... ah, it doesn't matter.

Right. Anything else? Anything about your wife? He's written down the phrase 'garage werewolf' here. And the word 'has motivation'.

I don't remember what I said.

Well, I know. It says that... you said she puts you in the garage, accused you of being a paedophile, and kept the kids away from you a lot of the time.

Yes, I think I did say that. It wasn't true, not in-

Why did you say that? To... to get his immortality? You people - why does everyone always have to have some sort of sympathy story? Neither of us need it, we don't need to be told that your lives are worth saving. He didn't need to be told that 'your life is worse than his'. You don't have to make a sob story to try and get people to listen to you. He did it because it made his experiences seem more authentic. And to be honest, after telling these stories for this long, he did become those stories.

You know, you don't have to do this. One of the things that he always

said to me is that nobody deserved immortality. We make it ourselves. He used to talk about this idea of the 'second death', I'm sure he rambled on about it to you, too. There's nothing spiritual or metaphysical about it, either, I think that... when you die, you die, you stop working, there doesn't seem to be anything else there. But when the last birthday card is sent to your old address, when the last person visualises you in a fond memory, when the last person wishes they had known you more, that's when you really die.

...

And he was scared of death. After the accident at the sawmill, though, I think he became brave. Not foolhardy, but harder. Stronger. And he always wanted to live forever, in this 'second life' he talked about. And I hope by speaking to all these people, he got what he wanted. Before he died, he spoke to over two hundred people. Maybe changing their lives for the better. I hope so. I hope there were times where you thought about what you saw when you went to visit him. It's what he would have wanted. All he wanted from life.

I hope he taught you to do something. I know he taught a lot of people to remember to think. That's all you can do really. To think of the stories of the people before you, what they would have wanted you to remember them as. I'm sure you've been told this before, and are aware of in your sixties. So, it seems like you've gone out there and done something with your life. You got what you wanted, your daughters are off to college now, where are they going?

Uh, Cornell. Both of them. Bright little things.

Sounds wonderful! Hopefully the fees aren't... weighing you down too much.

They're working odd jobs around the campus. Goes a long way.

It does, it does.

Yes, definitely.

...

Again, sorry for calling and asking about your husband, it must be-

No, don't be. Don't be. Every time I get a call, I know that somewhere out there is another person who still remembers him.

Oh, well, yes. I guess so.

...

...

I hope you and your daughters have a good day.

Well, thank you. Have a... have a good day.