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Abigail Jane Beaird April 12, 2022

Finding My Reflection in Darkness: An Exploration of Memory in *Black Mirror*

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Abstract
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In this thesis, I address how memory plays a role in not only life, but also in the grieving process following death. Through an in-depth analysis of two episodes of the hit Netflix anthology *Black Mirror,* I explore how technology can interrupt, and ultimately manipulate, the process of grief to the point madness. In "The Entire History of You," I explore how the grain technology leads the main character, Liam Foxwell, to obsess over his memory, ultimately resulting in the loss of his wife and daughter. In "Be Right Back," I consider how the role of a humanoid robot stunts the forward progress of the main character, Martha, following the death of her husband. I utilize the two disciplines of film and philosophy to analyze these episodes in sufficient depth. I anecdotally integrate my personal experience with grief, following my father's death, to strengthen the reader's understanding of the episodes. *Black Mirror* often attempts to "solve" the grieving process using sophisticated technology, I argue that this process is one that should not, and need not, be solved. The anthology attempts to warn us of the potential risks, and pitfalls, of the overuse of technology. *Black Mirror* urges us to appreciate the imperfections that contribute to memory and humanity while we remain conscious as we will eventually fade into darkness, reduced to nothing more than a figment of the past.

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For my father,
who will never have the chance to read this thesis,
but would have been proud to know I completed it.

INTRODUCTION

"To fear death … is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not,

to think one knows what one does not know." – Plato[1]

When I was nine years old, I had the same dream every night for nearly a year when my mother turned off the lights in my childhood, baby-pink colored bedroom. A masked man would somehow scale the side of my New York City apartment building, only to break into my window on the twelfth floor, killing my entire family first and saving my death for last.

This nightmare is not necessarily strange for a young girl, especially one who grew up watching far too many violent, heart-pounding action movies. However, this recursive nightmare was more than just the fear of an imaginary masked man, but rather it was the first of many nightmares that evolved into the fear of something bigger. Although I didn't know it then, these nightmares were the first manifestations of my greatest fear: my own inevitable death.

I remember when these nightmares began to turn into daydreams. It was the kind of daydream that shifts your eyes to fixate on or stare blankly at an object; the kind that removes you from any sense of reality; the kind that forces you to try to navigate the endless downward spiral into the rabbit hole of the unknown.

The first confrontation with your greatest fear is bound to be dreadful. For years, during the endless spirals, I found comfort in one thing: death was most likely far away, something that would eventually happen. That consolation abruptly vanished when my father passed away at the age of fifty-nine from a sudden heart attack. That my father died at fifty-nine belied the comfort that I felt about the "eventuality" of death. His death brought home to me the unknowability of

[1] Plato, "Apology of Socrates," 29.

death's approach, the sense that it ambushes when we least expect. One of the main things I remember in the weeks following his death was that adults repeated the same statement to me countless times, but just in different words: "It was quick and painless."

But was it really? How could they know? After all, they did not die; *my father did*.

For me, the answer was crystal clear: They did not know. They could not know. They had no more information about the meaning of death than I did at that moment. Months later, while exploring my own experience with grief, I realized that the agreed upon statement formulated by the adults was not meant to answer any of my existentially pressing questions about death. Their statement was solely used to reassure and ease the fears of the living during the process of grieving. "It was quick and painless" functioned as a coping mechanism and only deepened my sense of both curiosity and despair when thinking about my own death.

Socrates once said "To know, is to know that you know nothing. That is the meaning of true knowledge."[2] For Socrates, epistemological humility is indispensable when it comes to the complexity of the nature of knowledge and living a life predicated on wisdom. I now understand that there is only one thing about death of which I am certain: the fact that I know nothing. When it comes to death, I will know nothing about it for the rest of my life. I will not be able to see it coming. And while it is true that dying is a process, the fact of death is not something that that I will witness. I will not be able to stop it. I cannot now know with absolute certainty where or when death will take me. And I certainly will not know why it happened. The realization that my greatest fear was not individual, but rather a part of human nature, was eerily reassuring. Knowing that death spares no one is comforting, but the fact *of my* death is still haunting.

[2] Socrates, c.470 BCE.

Over the past two years, I have had to navigate loss and grief while studying at one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. Add to that being completely isolated during a global pandemic, I have had to find a way to still be a "normal" nineteen-, twenty-, and twenty-one-year-old. These personal experiences are inextricably related to the subject matter of my thesis project. My thesis project is primarily an analysis of the depiction of memory in relation to obsession and grief in the hit Netflix science-fiction anthology *Black Mirror*. Although *Black Mirror* is an anthology, it was first released on Channel 4 on British television. Netflix purchased the rights to the show in 2015, and then, the following year, produced and released season three. Moreover, I frame my personal experiences with grief, and my understanding of *Black Mirror*, within the context of the "big questions" that philosophers have been trying to answer for centuries. In this way, I bring together memoir, film analysis, and philosophical frames of reference.

In this thesis, I will explore two episodes of *Black Mirror,* "The Entire History of You" and "Be Right Back," both of which explore the role of memory in relationship to the process of grief. Memory is one of the key parts of what constitutes one's being. It shapes how one navigates the world, how one thinks, and how one feels. Experiences, which ultimately turn into memories, shape who you are, how you live your life, and how you see other people. Our imagination produces an audible and visual image of an experience from our own perspective. Our memory is comprised of the sum of these moments or images of our past. *Black Mirror* forces us to examine, and ultimately appreciate, our memories, despite their imperfect nature.

In the five-season anthology, each episode of *Black Mirror* explores different forms of imagined or advanced technology — some of which are eerily like what we already use in the twenty-first century. From a world where you rate people in the same way that you rate your

Uber driver to a device you insert into your child's brain to track them, *Black Mirror* pushes the boundaries of our current use and understanding of various technologies. The world of *Black Mirror* explores what happens when digital technology pushes humans too far: to the brink of insanity. *Black Mirror* concocts the technologies of our worst nightmares, exploring how advances in technology can corrupt and destroy human relationships. In these two episodes, the creator of *Black Mirror*, Charlie Brooker, toys with the emotions of the audience, constantly trying to solve "the problem" that is the grieving process.

Through an in-depth film analysis, I address the myriad ways in which *Black Mirror* circumvents the grieving process, focusing on the shortcomings of various futuristic technologies; ultimately, I use this series as a case study not only to understand the larger philosophical questions that plague the grieving process more generally but also to examine how the series, and my analysis, can be applied to my own memories and personal experience with grief.

In chapter one, I discuss the role of obsession in relation to the idea of memory in the "The Entire History of You." The episode explores a form of technology called "the grain," which is a device that allows you to have access to auto visual recordings of your memory since the technology was first implanted. In theory, this technology sounds like it would be a great addition to our world. Not only could you remember your memories with greater detail, but you would also never forget a single thing. Within the first few minutes of the episode, the main characters demonstrate the ways in which such an invention is more harmful, than helpful. Brooker uses the dynamic of a marital relationship to show us how too much knowledge can only stunt forward progress in relationships, and ultimately within the grieving process.

To analyze the grieving process, in relationship to memory, I analyze my own experiences with memory prior to, and following, my father's passing. I explore the potential twenty-first century application of the grain to my own experience with death, weighing the pros and cons of the technological device. I explore the ways in which this technology could be abused to the point of obsession or addiction, using the protagonist's experience with the grain as an example for the shortcomings of unlimited memory. Lastly, I consider the role of depression in the episode, comparing its conceptualization in film to my own lived experience within the real world.

In chapter two, I examine the role of memory in the process of grief in "Be Right Back." This episode tries to answer the question regarding whether a human being can be replaced after death; and ultimately if this technology will help aid in the grieving process. I illustrate, through the main character's arc, that trying to keep a human alive after death will only extend, and worsen, the grieving process. I also use the robotic version of the deceased to explain how human consciousness cannot be encapsulated in any form.

In addition, I evaluate the shortcomings of this proposed "advance" in technology, exploring the idea of the persistence of the soul after death from the viewpoint of the discipline of Western philosophy. I use my own philosophical knowledge to explain the plausibility of life after death. Through an in-depth shot-by-shot analysis of the episode, I inspect the main characters' dialogue, and how it is analogous to my own language regarding the topic of grief. I finally demonstrate how this relationship between a human and a human-like robot impacts our understanding of denial in the process of grief.

Throughout the anthology, the overarching metaphor in *Black Mirror* is that the "Black Mirror" is simply the image that we see of ourselves when we shut off our computer, or any form

of technology. More simply, *Black Mirror* is nothing more than an accurate depiction of the greatest fears of human beings, most evident upon closer examination of our external, as well as internal, flaws in the mirror. I believe that my individual life experience, exhibited in the form of memoir, alongside my analytical training in both disciplines of film and philosophy, allows me to thoroughly explore *Black Mirror* from a unique perspective. While *Black Mirror* is often disregarded as another meaningless Netflix binge-worthy show, purely created for entertainment, I believe that it is one of the few forms of contemporary television that forces us to look inward, revealing the flaws and imperfections within our own society.

This thesis is much more than a descriptive analysis of a television show; it involves an ethical evaluation of how *Black Mirror* aims to warn us of the possible consequences of including advanced technologies within our daily lives. More specifically, this thesis is about memory, love, and loss and their context within the existential context of our own mortality. I deploy relevant concepts from various philosophers to help frame my own understanding of how to move forward with my own life after loss. This thesis, while an extensive academic analysis of the larger questions posed by *Black Mirror*, is an essential component of my grieving process.

CHAPTER ONE

"THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF YOU": MEMORY & OBSESSION

"Life must be understood backward. But it must be lived forward." – Søren Kierkegaard[3]

For my father's memorial service, I wanted to mention a vivid memory from my childhood about him in my speech. I spent hours, and countless plane rides, trying to recall substantive moments from my childhood, but I found myself grasping at straws. I remember asking my mother and my sister for suggestions, trying to find something to use as the basis for my speech. I grew increasingly frustrated. Not only was I unable to remember any of these moments, but I was also unable to ask my father about them.

When my father died, his memories went with him. I will never know his fondest recollections of our relationship from my childhood. My father, who has been dead for almost two years now, has a memory to which I will never have access

But what if I had access to his memories of the two of us?

What if he could have left me with memories of my childhood?

What if I even had access to all my own memories that I have forgotten?

The grain technology in "The Entire History of You*"* provides this complete, individualized rolodex of memories at the push of a button.

The episode, which explores an obsession with memory, is centered around a technology called the grain. The grain is a device that allows you to view first-person technologically advanced recordings of the grain. The grain allows you to access any of your memories with the push of a button: "it can record and play back (privately or publicly) everything a person sees

[3] Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*.

and hears."[4] The remote for the grain is the size of a car key, but it works exactly like that of a television remote. You can play, pause, replay, and even zoom in on any memory recorded through your eyes. The technology works like that of a digitized rolodex: you can circle through every memory you have ever recorded through your own eyes and stop on the one you want. Once you have selected a moment in time you can either replay that moment for yourself on the surface of your eyes, or you can project your memory to others on a digitized surface, such as a television screen or a taxi display, to share it with other people. Due to the idea of the "redo": or the ability to re-watch a memory whenever, you can fully immerse yourself in a moment as if it is happening once again. The advertisement for the grain even boasts a recreation of the senses within each redo: "Live, Breathe, Smell. Full spectrum memory…. because memory is for living." The ability to review memory in such detail, although immersive, can become obsessive over time, preventing forward progress.

REPLAY

For our protagonist Liam Foxwell (Toby Kebell), the grain is exactly that: a tool to further his obsession with memory. The specific moment he chooses to obsess over for most of the episode is the memory of his wife, Ffion, or Fi, Foxwell (Jodie Whittaker) speaking to her old friend Jonas (Tom Cullen), at a dinner party. When Liam initially enters the room, his wife does not notice his presence: she is entranced in her conversation with Jonas. Throughout the evening, after watching their various interactions, Liam begins to suspect that his wife had an affair with Jonas.

[4] Gregor Balke and Bart Englen, "The Entire History of You and Knowing Too Much: Should You Want the Grain?" in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, by David Kyle Johnson (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 29.

At home that evening, Liam spends hours drinking and projecting his memories of the dinner party, focusing primarily on his wife's glances at Jonas. In the morning, after a night of extensive reviewing and organizing of his memories, Liam is still drinking in excess whilst reviewing the footage, as if no time has passed at all. He yearns for irrefutable evidence that his wife was unfaithful, to satisfy his need to be certain. Similar to that of Liam's fixation, French philosopher René Descartes, who is obsessed with absolute certainty, feels as if his world is crumbling when plagued by doubt, evident in the beginning of Meditation Two. He writes,

> "Yesterday's meditation has thrown me into such doubts that I can no longer ignore them, yet I fail to see how they are to be resolved. It is as if I had suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool; I am so tossed about that I can neither touch bottom with my foot, nor swim up to the top."[5]

He exists in a vacuum of unresolved thought, in that he "can neither touch bottom with my foot, nor swim up to the top."[6] Similarly, Liam's world crumbles in his search for proof of his wife's infidelity. Liam is unable to sleep; it is as if he has "suddenly fallen into a deep whirlpool," completely absorbed by the perfect recall of his grain.[7] Liam must obtain further epistemological closure to emerge from the grasp of his memories before he is driven mad or condemned to live in a permanent state of skepticism.

To obtain epistemological closure, Liam decides to drive to Jonas's house to confront him, while still under the influence. Upon arrival at Jonas's house, Liam taunts Jonas, and subsequently hits Jonas's head with an empty bottle of liquor. Liam tackles Jonas to the ground and breaks the empty bottle. While holding the sharp broken bottle of alcohol to Jonas's neck, he

[5] Descartes, Rene. 2008. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Michael Moriarty. Oxford World's Classics. London, England: Oxford University Press.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

orders Jonas to “wipe”, or delete, every memory of his wife, or he will gouge out his grain. To ensure that Jonas deletes all his memories of Fi, Liam forces Jonas to project his memories onto a screen.

Following this altercation, Liam consults his grain to review the footage, focusing on the moment where Jonas projects all his memories onto the screen. One of the memories was from only 18 months ago; his wife was pictured naked, in his own bed. As a result, Liam realizes that his wife cheated on him. In the denouement of the episode, Liam confronts Fi; he asks her to show him her memory of the affair; he repeats “I need to see it, Fi”, reminding the viewer of his fixation on his memory and his need to be right.[8] She reluctantly shows him the redo, ultimately contributing to her decision to leave Liam and take their daughter with her.

REWIND

When I am asked to think of one of my favorite memories with my father from my childhood, I think of my fifth birthday. My parents hosted a birthday party for me at the local craft store near my house; about thirty kids and their parents packed themselves into the space which was meant for about half as many people. While the kids painted pottery and played games throughout the afternoon, the parents socialized, drank, and took pictures. I remember playing limbo with a turquoise-colored pool noodle. I remember that my extravagant birthday cake was about three times larger than it needed to be and was shaped and decorated like Princess Ariel. I can see the pottery studio, with papier-mâché butterflies hanging from the ceiling. I can hear my mother’s favorite pair of high heels clacking as she walks around the

[8] Balke and Englen, "The Entire History of You and Knowing Too Much,” 29.

room. And I can even see the other kids running under the noodle in front of me, playing limbo. But then, when the line loops back around to the front, I see myself.

I see the birthday girl at the front of the line. I see my pink headband almost about to fall off my head as I duck under the turquoise noodle. And I see my black Mary Janes and little white socks, with the lace scalloped edges barely peeking out. This is the moment when I realize that my favorite memory is not actually my memory at all. It is my father's memory, as he was the one holding the camcorder that day, and every other day. This is my fifth birthday through his eyes, not my own. I am reliving the past through a memory that is not even mine.

In my young adulthood, I have noticed that my memories have faded with age. Due to my father's death, amongst other trauma in my upbringing, I have hardly any of my own memories of my childhood. As I do not have a grain like Liam, I am unable to recall memories in perfect detail in an instant. Any memories that I do have are foggy and lack specificity. The earliest *real* memory I can access in my life is from when I was seven or eight years old. I am certain that this memory exists only in my mind as there is no photo or no video of this moment anywhere. Additionally, when I close my eyes, I see the memory from my own perspective, rather than through the eyes of a third party. This memory is also incredibly blurry: I remember swimming in my pool with my cousin, racing back and forth and diving under water for torpedoes. My father is there too – in the pool as well – but it is as if he is engulfed in fog or steam. I know where he was in the pool, and I remember where I once stood, but I can only see the mere outline of him. We do not speak in this memory, rather it is just a disjointed fragment. The memory is nothing more than a glimpse into my past.

In the world in which you have the grain, there is no such thing as a glimpse of the past, no matter your age. During the episode, we are even able to see that Liam and Fi's daughter,

Jody, has a grain herself despite being less than a year old. At one point they even project her memory of the night onto the television screen to see how many times she woke up while they were away at the dinner party. They can watch her point of view from the moment they left until the moment they came home. They are even able to see themselves putting their daughter in their crib before they leave. While watching Jody's redo from the evening, looking up from her crib at her parents as they say goodbye, I realized that their daughter would have access to this infantile memory forever.

In the hypothetical world where Jody grows up, when she is twenty-one, just as I am today, she will be able to access her very first memories. She will be able to watch hours of footage of herself screaming and crying as an infant in her own crib. She will be able to see how her view of her father and her mother has changed over a decade. She will be able to see how she acted at her own fifth birthday. Jody's first memory is from at least seven years prior to my first memory, and yet it can be recalled in so much more detail.

While the grain advertises unlimited access to "full spectrum memory," it is important to examine the distinction between memory and recordings. Although the grain presents an accurate and often objective recreation of the past, it is not completely the same, or even comparable, to genuine human memory. The grain allows the user to summon a technological recording of any moment in time since the grain was implanted. In my own mind, when I summon a memory, I am not viewing a recording, rather I am placing myself in a moment filled with overcoming emotion. The grain is an endless and exact recording of your past, whereas organic human memory is an inaccurate first-person perspective of the past. While some may argue that the grain is not dissimilar from that of my father's camcorder, I would disagree. One advantage of the grain is that it allows an individual to re-watch a first person recording rather

than a third person recording of any moment in time. While Jody may not be able to feel the exact emotions attached to her infantile memories, she can pause, play, and even zoom in on every aspect of that moment which was recorded by her grain. These abilities may ultimately spark emotions from her subconscious; whereas I have very few memories to even spark emotions.

While most of my memories are nothing more than fragments which tend to blur, Jody can recover a recording of every memory she has had since her grain was implanted in perfect detail. I am only able to watch recordings, such as that of my fifth birthday through my father's camcorder, from another individual's point of view. Even then, my father's recording is limited. It is short, often no more than a few minutes long, and lacks the ability to zoom in with perfect detail. For example, the grain allows Liam to recreate conversations that he did not overhear between Fi and Jonas solely from lipreading, whereas the sound of screaming children and the background chatter of their parents drowns out any specific conversation from my birthday party. Although Jody may not remember her childhood, or the emotions which accompany every recording within her grain, she will still be able to replay her own view of the world as a child, from her perspective, whenever she wants. All I have are videos and pictures of my childhood taken from the perspective of other people.

The only thing on my desk, other than my laptop, is a photo of my father, my mother, and me, at the same fifth birthday. My father, the videographer and photographer, even took hundreds of photos at my fifth birthday, and yet, I have no *real* memory of that day. I only can view recordings of that day in the form of photos and videos. The colors even seem duller in the photos, than they do in the three-minute video I have. When I stare at the photo for long enough, trying to remember the moments of what happened next, I draw a blank. And then I look to the

left of me in the picture, at my father's face, and am reminded of the harsh reality that is my present. I am alone, living in a reality in which my father is gone.

PAUSE

In the final montage of the episode, we are immersed within one of Liam's memories as our point of view shifts to the first person; we see his environment through his eyes. In the memory, he walks over to Fi, saying I love you then giving her a kiss. He then chooses to walk over to the crib to see his daughter; he waits for his daughter to turn around and then the footage suddenly rewinds. Then replays. Then it rewinds again. The screen then cuts away from Liam's first-person memory to a shot of him alone lying on his bed, the bedroom barren with his eyes completely glazed over. This presentation of his eyes demonstrates that he is immersed in one of his memories. He is reminiscing on the past where his daughter and wife had not yet left him by watching one of his favorite memories of his daughter repeatedly.

As shown in the last part of the episode, although Liam can differentiate between the present and the past, he prefers to live in the utopia of his memory rather than creating a new future for himself without his family. This poses an issue for Liam's future as the process of making new memories is philosophically important to how we progress, and exist, as human beings. Jean-Paul Sartre stresses the fact that existence precedes essence; in fact, this claim is a central motif of existentialism. For Sartre, our existence involves a constant transcendence of our past. "Existence precedes essence" posits that you first exist in society, then you define yourself. Sartre states this concept to emphasize the importance of self-definition. He believes that humans have absolute freedom in their actions and that actions represent choices. He states that we, as humans, possess the ability to change our personalities and therefore to make different decisions.

Sartre defines this ability to make choices and act on our decisions as our freedom. Our existence always points toward the future, to what has yet to come or to become. As Sartre writes, "You are what you are not and are not what you are."[9] It can be argued that Liam exists within a state where he denies his consciousness. To remain obsessed with his own past is to risk reducing himself to a fixed and static moment in time, an essence, a thing, which denies his future, which is another way of saying that he denies his freedom. He is not living, rather he is merely existing.

Liam miserably drags his feet around his house, burying himself within a series of memories in an album entitled "Ffion." This album contains his favorite memories, or moments with his wife, all of which take place in different parts of their house. He ventures to the kitchen, where we see a memory of Fi walking up to him after sipping coffee. The absence of his family allows him endless time to hyper fixate onto each memory, rewinding and replaying the smallest smirk or change in emotion on his wife's face multiple times. As evident in the juxtaposition of the editing, Liam emerges from a memory into his poorly lit house, lacking any color.

Contrastingly, when he returns to a memory, he is overwhelmed by light. In the memory, his wife walks up to him, right in front of his face, he pauses his grain on this moment which emphasizes Fi's beauty in his eyes, almost as if to preserve her soul within his own mind. Liam is trapped within "an eternal present" which emphasizes "the infinite nature of ostensibly finite recall."[10][11] Liam is unable to endure his own reality, instead during this depressive episode following his wife's absence, he elects to lose himself in the "eternal present," living within the finite details of his memories.[12] He is no longer moving forward, but merely exploring his

[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Náusea* (Madrid: Alianza, 1994).
[10] Suzie Gibson and Dean Biron, "Borges's 'Infinite Finite' in Charlie Brooker's Black Mirror," in *The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror*, ed. Margaret Gibson and Clarissa Carden (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 42.
[11] Gibson and Biron, "Borges's 'Infinite," 43.
[12] Ibid.

memory in the present.[13] This introduces us to Sartre's conception of bad faith. He writes, "The one who practices *bad* faith is hiding a displeasing *truth* or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth."[14] In essence, Liam is hiding the "displeasing truth" that his wife and daughter have left him, or rather he "presents as truth a pleasing untruth" as he exists within a reality that remains unchanged; a reality that is filled with his memories of the past, rather than a reality which contains the constant fabrication of new memories.

After he returns to reality following each memory, his bright colored utopia is juxtaposed with his now dark and dreary house. Notably, his house is full of countless empty bottles of beer and various hard liquors. This emphasis on the empty beer bottles highlights Liam's obsession with alcohol and memory; this reminds us of Liam's hours spent reviewing his memories while drinking. Both his grain and his alcoholism are instrumental in bringing him to this point of grief and loneliness. This is symbolic as much alcohol is made from grain. Although unmarked, the bottle that Liam drinks from contains a brownish colored liquid, presumably whiskey, which is distilled from a variety of grains, such as barley, corn, and wheat. Alcohol can cause memory loss when consumed in excess. Presumably, Liam uses alcohol as a device with which to cope with his obsession with his grain, or his unlimited access to memory. While Liam drinks enough alcohol to impair his driving, the only way for him to truly "forget," or prevent the creation of memory, is to black out. Even then, he can look back and see all his memories from his first drink until the moment where he loses consciousness, even the moments recorded in an egregiously drunken state. Alcohol serves to not only numb his pain, but it also prevents the creation of new memories, which would only further his obsession with the past. In addition to his abuse of alcohol and disheveled appearance, the dilapidated state of his house suggests that

[13] Ibid.
[14] Sartre, *La Náusea*

he has been watching redos of his old life for a long, indiscernible amount of time. It is evident that, after reviewing this folder, he is caught in the depths of a vicious cycle.

REFLECTIONS

In the final scene of the episode, Liam examines his last memory of Fi in his folder: the two of them are in the bathroom, gazing into the mirror together. He then leaves the memory, placing himself back in reality. Gazing into the same mirror, Liam stands, his eyes open and mouth agape, overwhelmed by this redo. He is truly alone, reflecting on his memory. Upon looking in the mirror, it is as if Liam recognizes his dejected state for the first time. This moment is a stark reminder of the central metaphor of *Black Mirror*, which suggests that upon seeing our reflection within the mirror of a screen, or in this case within a bathroom mirror, we are finally able to acknowledge our greatest flaws and fears perpetuated by technology.[15] He slowly grazes his finger behind his ear to feel the grain implant, as if to acknowledge the memories that exist within his grain. In this moment, it appears as though Liam is far too lost in his current state, constantly reviewing the memories of his wife. Since his wife and daughter left him, he has been endlessly obsessing over his last memories of his wife. Liam is not truly living, he is solely existing, imprisoned by his own memory.

I, too, obsess over my last memories of my father. However, in contrast to Liam's perfect memories of his wife, my last memories of my father are almost nonexistent. In fact, I do not remember the last time I saw my father prior to his death. On the way back to New York, the day after my father died, I found myself dissecting our exchanges, trying to preserve every memory. I

[15] Claire Benn, "Playtest and the Power of Virtual Reality: Are Our Fears Real?" in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, by David Kyle Johnson (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 117.

fixated on each message, particularly the ones to which I did not reply. Using a combination of my photos, calendar, and even something as trivial as my step count, I tried to determine what I was doing in each instance in which I did not respond to my father. I wanted to go back in time to understand what caused my coldness, or my silence, in my communication with the man who raised me.

In my search, I discovered that the day before I flew back to Atlanta for my sophomore year of college, my father wanted to see me. I responded, "I will see you soon." A promise that I clearly unintentionally broke. Even today, I find myself obsessing over this broken promise, and so many other broken promises, in my text exchange with my father.

Crippled by his obsession with his memory, Liam elects to rip the grain out of the side of his head, slicing behind his ear with a single razor blade. Liam attempts to extract the small device, embedded within his nerves, with a sharpened pair of cuticle clippers. Authors Gibson and Byron assert that "Liam chooses to extract the grain because he cannot handle the opportunity to endlessly reproduce stretches of history from his and his wife's past."[16] However, it is not that he cannot simply handle this opportunity, but rather that he refuses to remain trapped by his past. Liam is prepared to embrace and experience a new and unknown future. He summons this final memory of his wife alongside him in the bathroom, as if to say goodbye to her one last time. As indicated earlier in the episode, the removal of the grain can risk blindness. Liam is willing to lose his sight, as well as his old life; he would rather live on without the grain than be blinded by his false reality, merely existing in a world full of addiction.[17]

[16] Helena Bassil-Morozow Gibson, "God Is an Algorithm: Free Will, Authenticity and Meaning in Black Mirror," in *The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror*, ed. Margaret Gibson and Clarissa Carden (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 182.
[17]Balke and Englen, "The Entire History of You and Knowing Too Much," 29.

Bleeding from behind his ear onto his hand, Liam finally grasps the grain and begins to tug on it. As he pulls more and more, we see a short montage of his memories of his wife flashing before our eyes. Not only does this signify the loss of his wife and his daughter, but also the loss of his memories of them. Once Liam has almost removed the grain entirely, we see his eyes become glossy one last time, mirroring the same appearance they had while watching a redo earlier in the episode. Then, once the grain is extracted completely, the screen suddenly cuts to black to end the episode. While Liam's fate is unclear, this sharp cut to black suggests that Liam's life comes to a halt once he extracts the device, deleting all his memories. Liam, while trapped and unable to make new memories, has been reduced to nothing more than existence of his grain. Once this grain is removed, it is as if he ceases to exist: "The reduction of life to memory… is extremely unsettling perhaps because it is true: for is not our consciousness largely made up of memories?"[18] Thus, if life is nothing more than the sum of our memories, then without memory, or the grain, Liam ceases to consciously exist.

But what does this then suggest about humans with imperfect memories, or someone like me, who has hardly any memory of my childhood or my father?

BLURRY VISION

My last memory of my father is from the day after my nineteenth birthday, almost fourteen years to the day since my fifth birthday party. My father had not purchased a birthday present for me in a few years: as compensation, he wanted to get me "something nice" for this birthday. In fact, he practically insisted upon taking me shopping.

[18] Gibson and Biron, "Borges's 'Infinite Finite' in Charlie Brooker's Black Mirror," 45.

That day, we decided to go to the Nike store to purchase an expensive pair of running shoes for my nice gift. I do not remember much from the day other than the fact that after we checked out of the store, we walked outside to see that it was "raining cats and dogs," my father's favorite way to describe a New York City monsoon. For several blocks we ran in small spurts, stopping intermittently under large awnings for moments of dryness. The next thing I remember is arriving at the Apple store with my father; however, I have a distinct recollection of the view out of the store window. Not only was it a lovely day, but the light from the sun was refracting against the glass Apple store, projecting a shadow in the shape of an Apple logo on the ground in front of the store.

But how could it be raining cats and dogs one minute, and remarkably bright the next? The answer is that it was not. These two memories occurred separately. While they both took place in the same region of New York City, they were entirely different events on two different dates.

I bring up this memory to admit that the grain expert, Colleen, in "The Entire History of You" was correct in her statement regarding organic memory, or memory produced without the implantation of the grain:

"You know half the organic memories you have are junk. Just not trustworthy."

While she stated this, in part, to purely advertise the benefits of life with a grain, her statement rings true. In *Black Mirror and Philosophy*, Blake and Engelen argue that "Human memories are easily confabulated."[19] And that Colleen is "right, and the accuracy of our memories just gets worse with age."[20] My last memory of my father is not so much a memory, but rather it is an amalgamation of my last few moments with him: running errands, purchasing

[19] Balke and Englen, "The Entire History of You and Knowing Too Much," 30.
[20] Ibid, 29.

gifts, and navigating the New York City subway system during a midsummer afternoon monsoon. If I were reduced to "nothing more than my memory," as suggested by the quotation at the end of the last section, my memory would reflect almost nothing about myself, or anything at all for that matter, being that there is very little to reflect. As I have hardly any memory, apart from blurred glimpses, I would appear as a disconnected, empty being when, in fact, I am far more than that.

This statement about "organic memory" is true despite its over exaggeration. Half of my organic memories of my childhood and my father are in fact "not trustworthy." As stated previously, I must often consult photos and videos to determine if one of my recollections even occurred in the first place. However, this statement lacks nuance. My organic memories are not "junk," they are simply imperfect recreations of the past. The grain does not allow forgotten memories of your loved one that "disappear" to be recovered by chance, prompted by sensory reminders such as a song or a phrase.

While I may not be able to recall the specifics of the last day I saw my father, or any of my last days with him, I will always be able to remember his essence, regardless of whether the memories fade. The larger memories, and the minutia of the weather, or the place, or the time is not what is important. What is important about these memories of my father is that his essence withstands my bad and "untrustworthy" memory. I will always be able to recognize his presence in my daily life, despite my incapacity to summon the memory of my fifth birthday in perfect detail at the push of a button. Even though my father no longer "exists" in our society, his essence will always live on within my memory.

FATHER'S DAUGHTER

"You are your father's daughter" is a phrase that has been engrained in my brain for as long as I can remember. My family even jokes that I am the son that my father always wanted, and the daughter that he never knew he needed. I never truly understood the meaning of this phrase until after my father died. In the same way that my relatives and friends are reminded of my father's essence while looking at me, I now see my father everywhere, both literally and figuratively.

The first time I thought I saw my father was in an airport, weeks after his death. I turned my head and saw a man of the same stature as my father, wearing the same favorite-colored blue shirt. On pure instinct, I walked down the crowded terminal, steps behind him, hoping to get a closer look, hoping, that by some miracle, my father was alive and well, meandering about the LaGuardia airport. Not surprisingly, the man shifted, and I saw his face, which looked nothing like my father. His face did not feature his green eyes set remarkably far back into his head, the same blue-green eyes that I inherited. The same blue-green eyes which would let out tears, streaming uncontrollably down my cheek.

The first time I heard the song "Man on the Moon" by R.E.M, I had a visceral response. My vision became skewed, fogged by the tears which were desperately attempting, and failing, to remain inside my eyes. I was immediately in the pool in the same backyard from my first real memory. That foggy memory now was accompanied by the sound of my father's favorite playlist. I had not heard this song in years, since long before he died. I remember scrambling to try to find the name of the song before it evaporated along with him.

The first time these memories created happy tears, tears of appreciation, was ironically amidst a moment of panic. Whilst staying in a hotel, my friends and I were locked out of our

room, the door hinge had closed upon itself, meaning the door would not open more than a few inches. Out of instinct, I began to turn the screws which adhered the deadbolt to the wall with nothing other than my freshly painted, red fingernail. In my floor length cocktail dress and four-inch stilettos, I removed two, and a half, of the screws before hotel maintenance arrived. Before the man could open his mouth, I asked him if he had a Philips head screwdriver.

Upon asking this question, I heard my father's voice ringing in my ears, explaining the difference between a Philips head and a flat head screwdriver. In this moment, my memory was not visual, rather it was auditory. Although it was only the sound of my father's voice, unaccompanied by an image, it was enough to remove me from the present. To be able to step back and recognize that if my father were present, he would be doing the exact same thing. And he certainly would not have let the maintenance man finish the job that he had started, in the same way that I did not.

At first, any reminder of my father used to make me cry instantly. It was too overwhelming, too much of a reminder that he was gone. But over time, these qualities, sayings, or even actions became something that I feel lucky to remember. When most of your memory of a loved one is suppressed by an immense amount of grief, you are unable to remember the little things. When you begin to heal, and these small moments come back, you cherish every finite aspect of your memory. Each recovered memory is a gift to be cherished, rather than a moment that becomes trivial upon repeated viewing. Liam's ability to recall memories in perfect detail, because of the grain, causes him to take his memories for granted. He lacks the ability to experience the overcoming emotion that accompanies the recollection of a memory once forgotten. Now whenever I do something that vaguely reminds me of my father, like unscrewing a deadbolt from a door with just my fingernail, I find myself laughing, imagining how he would

make fun of me for being so much like him. There is something powerful in these moments, in the indirectness of the memory. These memories seem to emerge from a hidden place, and yet the occasional reminder that they exist somewhere in my vast memory is more than enough. In contrast, the grain lacks the unanticipated nature of being enthralled by a forgotten memory when least expected.

For me, such infrequent, but profoundly wonderful memories once forgotten have a deeper value than possessing access to unlimited memory. Perhaps, because we suffer, some memories should be suppressed, in that they are far too overwhelming. Time away from them can promote healing. Time can also promote growth, which can help us to recall memories with greater maturity and understanding. The grain, in providing perfect recall, does not allow for growth, for a new way of interpreting one's memories of the past. Time and ambiguity can provide the basis for a more thorough narration of memory, rendering these recollections invaluable. While it would be advantageous to have perfect recall of every memory with, and of, my father, the truth that occupies my present remains unchanged. Keeping my father alive in my memory does not, and will never, change the fact that he is no longer with me.

If I have learned anything from "The Entire History of You," it is that I have just the right number of memories of my father, spanning from my childhood up until the day he died. While the quality and quantity of my memories will never be perfect, or even comparable to that of the grain, they are just enough to mourn the loss of my father in a healthy way, to continue to remember him in a productive manner, and to continue to love him as time passes. While some memories may fade, others find their way back into the light.

CHAPTER TWO

"BE RIGHT BACK": MEMORY & GRIEF

"Man is a being in search of meaning." – Plato[21]

My mother never calls me — she always waits for me to call her. I think that's what made the call that morning so frightening, because my phone rang not once, but twice.

It could not have been more than a minute from the time she called to the time I called her back, one hand on the cold door handle to my bedroom, the other holding my phone. I was only a step inside my bedroom when she answered on the first ring. In a shaky, but shockingly clear voice my mother said, "Dad died," to which I replied "No."

Although I was unable to articulate a more complex response other than the singular word "no," the question that I posed was instinctual, fueled by nothing other than pure shock. In "Be Right Back," Martha's instinctual question was, "It's not real, is it?" Following the tragic and unexpected death of her husband Ash, Martha is confronted by the weight of "the reality" of her husband's death. The most evident exploration of grief in *Black Mirror* is entitled "Be Right Back": a phrase that indicates the certainty of action in a world of uncertainty. It is a typical statement to a loved one while exiting the front door or a promise that can be broken in an instant by the unpredictability of death. The episode is centered upon a young couple, Martha and Ash, who move to the countryside, entirely isolated from other people. After getting married, they decide to move into Ash's parents' old country house, in exchange for their busy life in the city. Only weeks after they move, Martha receives her "call," just as I did, completely alone. That evening, Martha looks outside her window and is blinded by red and white lights accompanied

[21] Plato, *Apology of Socrates.*

with the blaring sound of sirens. When she opens the door, there are two police officers standing outside. Before they can even get a chance to speak, Martha slams the door in their face and walks away.

"Happy New Year" was my version of "Be Right Back." It was the last thing that I said to my father before he died. Not only was it twenty-six days prior, meaning it had been almost an entire month since we had last spoken, in retrospect, it felt meaningless. I simply responded to him with the same pleasantry. Nothing more, nothing less. It was a mindless text on what otherwise would have been a completely average day. In the car about an hour after receiving the call, I remember trying to find meaning in this last text. I was searching for meaning in something entirely meaningless. I was trapped inside my own head. I found myself trying to picture my father. I didn't want him to evaporate from my memory. I scrambled for images of him, words, phrases, any small happy moment in my memory to remind me of him, but I couldn't think of anything. It was as if I had no recent memories of him. For nearly a month, I could not think of anything. A month later, at his memorial service, the memories began to flood back. It was then that I began to think about all the things that I wish that I could have told him. The truth is, regardless of their significance, my last words to him would always be my last, but what if they weren't?

"I can sign you up to something that helps… It will allow you to speak to him," says Martha's friend, Sarah, at Ash's memorial service. In the future world of artificial intelligence in the world of *Black Mirror*, a service exists that allows you to "speak" to your loved ones after they die. This program is advertised to "help" by easing the grieving process. Martha, although appalled at first, is persuaded to converse with this virtual version of Ash after she discovers that she is pregnant with Ash's child, only days after his fatal accident. She calls her sister for

consolation, but she does not answer. In a moment of vulnerability, Martha decides to test out this service that claims to work as an online messaging service. Martha can "chat" with her late husband, or rather, a computer-generated version of him in the form of a text messaging service. His responses are generated entirely from his social media archives, photos, and his other online information. After messaging online for only a few short minutes, the virtual version of Ash suggests that they talk on the phone instead of through instant messaging. She is astounded once she hears that his artificial voice sounds exactly like her late husband's voice. Unlike any form of artificial intelligence that we have achieved thus far in the twenty-first century, this version of Ash does not sound robotic; rather, it is as if he is still alive and on the other end of the phone call. There is nothing that suggests that Martha isn't speaking to Ash.

Sound is arguably one of the most important components of trying to preserve your loved ones after they pass.[22] When my father first died, I was in complete shock; one of my first concerns was that I could not *hear* his voice in my head anymore. When I tried to think of him speaking in my memory, I drew a blank. Thankfully, due to the invention of the smartphone, I have access to voicemails, as well as videos, containing my father's voice.[23] When my father first died, I was in complete shock; one of my first concerns was that I could not *hear* his voice in my head anymore. When I tried to think of him speaking in my memory, I drew a blank. Thankfully, due to the invention of the smartphone, I have access to voicemails, as well as videos, containing my father's voice.

[22] Viper, Marianne, David Thyrén, and Eva Bojner Horwitz. "Music as Consolation—The Importance of Music at Farewells and Mourning." *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, (July 2020). https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222820942391.

[23] Within the Western philosophical tradition, sight or vision is privileged over the other senses, including sound. This is evident in Plato's theory of forms, which involved abstract intellection as the capacity for seeking the Truth. Even rationalist Descartes emphasized the importance of clear and distinct perceptions that involve a kind of "visual clarity." Although I am aware of these philosophical views, I argue that sound is important, evident in my own experience with sound following my father's passing.

In the afternoon on the day my father died, I replayed every voicemail I had of him. I did this repeatedly. It was the first and the last time that I had cried all day long. The tears were uncontrollable. Although it had only been a few hours, I felt that I was already losing his voice. My father had left me a voicemail, on New Year's Day, five years prior to his passing. It is one of the most recent voicemails I have of him. I have listened to that voicemail several hundred times. It lasts only a few seconds, but it is ingrained into the depths of my memory. Listening to his voice brings him back to life, even if only for a moment.

The few voicemails I have of my father make me grieve with a more severe degree of sadness; indeed, more so than any photos him. I think that it is because videos and photos of my father will never do him justice. They are purely images of how I see my father, but they are lacking my father's voice.

In tandem with the fear that you will lose the sound of your deceased loved one's voice, one of the most painful characteristics of grief, over time, is the knowledge that you will lose the visual image of your loved one. Over time, the accuracy of the mental image of your loved one decreases. Sadly, my father's face slowly faded away, much faster than I ever would have wanted or imagined. I would argue that this fear of losing the image of your loved one, or their presence, as it were, in your brain, is why Martha decided to take her relationship with the virtual version of her husband just one step further.

FINAL WISHES

After "speaking" with Ash for days, even weeks, over the phone, Martha is offered an even more immersive feature: an experimental version of the service that would allow Martha to possess a lifelike representation of Ash's being, referred to as Ashbot by writer Bradley Richards

in *Black Mirror and Philosophy*.[24] In an instant, Martha jumps at the chance to purchase this more immersive version of the service. While it may seem strange for some that Martha is so eager to purchase this feature, I think it is understandable to anyone who has lost a loved one. One of the first feelings that I experienced following my father's passing was the desire to bring him back, even for just a few minutes, to tell him all the things I never explicitly articulated.

Grief is full of wishes. I *wish* I could have said x, y, z to my father. I *wish* I could have called him before he died. I *wish* I could have prevented his death. I *wish* he could see me today. I *wish* he could be at my graduation, my wedding, or any other milestone that I have not yet reached. I *wish*, I *wish*, I *wish*, I *wish*; it goes on endlessly. If I had the chance to speak to my father again, I would certainly seize the moment. It is completely understandable that Martha wants to bring Ash back to life because her experience speaking with him on the phone feels so realistic. His voice, generated from videos of him, is entirely accurate. Ash's virtual voice reflects his actual sense of humor as well as the inflections in his voice. So, it is only natural for a grieving wife to assume, or hope, that this virtual, life-like version of Ash could replace her husband and ultimately alleviate her grieving process. Right?

The following morning, a mass in the shape of a human body, lacking any identifiable human features, and covered in plastic, is delivered to Martha's house. The mass, delivered by two delivery men, was sealed in a Styrofoam box, resembling a coffin-sized, white, chest-shaped freezer. As the instructions indicate, to activate Ashbot she must submerge the body in water. Not only does this remind me of the practice of baptism, but also of the idea of amniotic fluid which is necessary for the growth of an unborn baby. Martha places the featureless body-shaped

[24] Bradley Richards, "Be Right Back and Rejecting Tragedy: Would You Bring Back Your Deceased Loved One?" in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, by David Kyle Johnson (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 41.

mass in her bathtub for twenty-four hours to allow it to "grow" into Ashbot. Hours later, Ashbot, an artificially intelligent being, emerges from the bathtub, completely naked, *appearing* to be an identical copy of Ash's body and personality from head to toe.

When Martha first sees Ashbot, he emerges from her bathroom, naked and dripping from the bathtub water. She is stunned by not only his physical similarity to her husband, but also by how human he appears. She doesn't know how to speak or behave around him. Later, she spends several minutes just staring at him on the couch, several feet away from him. Slowly, she decides to interact with him more and more; she breaks into tears upon touching his hand for the first time. Almost as if it was out of pure instinct, she says,

"I missed you. I missed you so much."

This visceral expression is a clear example of Martha's profound attachment to Ashbot. Indeed, filled with tears in her eyes, she declares "I missed *you* so much." She cannot distinguish the artificial version of her husband from her husband who is no longer living. As she spends the next few days with him, peeling back the surface of the similarity of their physical features, voice, and mannerisms, Ashbot's artificiality and lack of true consciousness become evident.

To demonstrate that Ashbot could never replace Ash, I look to ontology: the branch of metaphysics that studies the idea of "being." On the persistence of the soul in *De Anima*, Aristotle explores what constitutes consciousness, or in other words, what makes us human.[25] In *De Anima*, or "On the Soul" in English, Aristotle states that the soul is the "first actuality of a natural organic body."[26] In short, Aristotle suggests that for the soul of a being to persist, or exist, it must be born, or have the potential to be born, in a natural body through natural

[25] Aristotle, De Anima.
[26] Aristotle, 412a27.

processes.[27] Within the context of *Black Mirror*, in the case of Ashbot, his body was produced in Martha's bathtub, in the same way a nostalgic childhood toy grows out of a capsule once placed in water, ultimately revealing its ability to turn into the shape of a dinosaur. Ashbot is the enlarged version of this beloved childhood toy, merely in the shape of a human. This shows us that Ashbot not only lacks human consciousness, but he also has no organic memory. According to the well-received philosophical view put forth by philosopher Bradley Richards, the key facet of consciousness is your memory.[28]

> "An individual cannot be replaced after death as they do not possess the same memory as the deceased…for a future or past being to be identical to a current person, they must share psychological features such as beliefs and memories. If a future being shares your psychological state, your memories and so on, then that being is you."[29]

Ashbot has many of the same qualities and memories as Ash; however, he is only an aggregate of what Ash chose to share online with others, rather than the real Ash who had his own thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. As he only has access to a finite number of Ash's memories, there is no way that this artificial version of Ash could share the same consciousness as Ash. Humans are not simply the perfect aggregate of who we are online. The differences in our memory, in our way of life, and our imperfections, no matter how small, are what make us human. One's online presence is merely the contrived image that one wishes to show others. Social media is a performance, one that does not accurately reflect life. Upon first meeting Ashbot, Martha even remarks that Ashbot looks like Ash "on a good day." On social media, we tend to post only the most flattering pictures of ourselves. Thus, Ashbot is the most attractive

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid, 41.
[29] Richards, "Be Right Back and Rejecting Tragedy," 44.

version of Ash as his features were drawn purely from his online photos. This digital aggregate, however, is often vastly different from reality.

IN THE DETAILS

"He had a mole there." Martha says as she points to Ashbot's barren chest.

This seemingly trivial detail illustrates the importance of private moments in a relationship: there are moments that need not be projected to the world, as they mean much more when they exist solely in the memory of two individuals, just like Ash and Martha. In fact, Martha's awareness of this imperfection further stresses the importance of their level of intimacy. As this small "imperfection" was not present on any images on Ash's social media, Ashbot was not "equipped" with this feature when he emerged from the bathtub. This mole, while nothing more than a common small mark on the surface of the skin, is something that only Martha knew, and remembered, about her late husband. I emphasize the point about the mole to demonstrate that it can signify deeply personal forms of meaning to others. I also emphasize the mole because of its eerily similar significance to my own life.

While the presence of the mole on Ash's chest for years meant nothing and was nothing more than a cluster of melanocytes, the absence of the mole is significantly more complex. After the death of a loved one, the smallest things—moles, laughs, and even irritating mannerisms—become the vehicle for carrying the weight of grief. They become an avenue for misplaced sadness, anger, denial, and so much more. Once she acknowledges the absence of this mole, Ashbot generates one to please her, maintaining the facade that he is just like Ash. Richards continues, "Shockingly, the new Ash is, in many respects, better than the old one, but Martha

finds herself disappointed with him."[30] Ashbot's ability to produce a mole on command is a stark reminder that not only is her husband gone, but this "man" sitting in front of her is not her husband, not human, and does not possess the same mind and body that her partner once possessed. In fact, Martha probably does not miss the mole at all; its absence has no effect on her life. However, she is greatly affected by the absence of the person to which the mole was attached.

I, too, like most of the human population, have moles on my body. As a child, my mom used to pretend to draw shapes on my back, connecting the myriad moles together with one line. One of my moles, coincidentally situated on my chest like that of Ash, even has a name that my family jokes about to no end. In short, that mole has meaning for me and my family. As I attempt to make sense of the significance of something as meaningless as a mole on the chest of an artificially intelligent human-like robot, I find myself confronted with the jarring nature of life and death. I find myself thinking about my own death, and what I will leave behind. The jokes in my family about the mole on my chest have taken up countless minutes, maybe even hours cumulatively, but one day, when I die, I wonder if my mole will be remembered. Of course, once I am dead, this will be something for the living to remember or to forget. Perhaps there will be someone who will struggle to recall such a detail. This points to the complexity and weight of grief: those who are still alive will fight to remember every detail of their loved one, even as it is impossible to preserve all aspects of an individual in your memory.

In the above paragraphs, I explore these two ideas about the imperfections to conclude with the question of the plausibility of the replication of a human, in any form: How could it ever be possible to encapsulate the meaning of a person when something as small as a mole can hold

[30] Ibid, 41.

so much significance as memory and ultimately, in this case, symbolize so much grief? In addition to the presence, or rather the lack thereof, of the mole on his chest, one of the most frustrating parts of Ashbot for Martha is the fact that he doesn't need to sleep, eat, or breathe to survive. Unlike her husband, he has no natural human instincts, needs, or desires. This becomes particularly frustrating for Martha in bed as Ashbot lays awake with his eyes open and without breathing.

"I don't really need to sleep," says Ashbot.

"Well, just try next time."

Martha must ask Ashbot to imitate sleeping, which furthers her inability to grieve as it is a reminder that the "being" to her side is not her husband, rather he is a mere fragment of Ash. Martha is living in a false reality in which she pretends that Ashbot "is" Ash. As Ashbot does not instinctually need to breathe, his bodily presence, particularly in intimate moments such as beside Martha in bed, is a constant reminder of his lack of human consciousness. This is only the first of many difficulties that she experiences as she attempts to make Ashbot appear human, to be more like her husband.

NOT ENOUGH

Isolation can be particularly detrimental when it comes to a healthy progression within the grieving process. When you are alone, it is only natural to get lost in a cycle of deep thought. When you are alone, time is relative and days, even weeks, blend together. Next thing you know it has been three months and nothing has changed; your loved one is still dead. I have experienced this isolation firsthand. My father died only a little over a month prior to the first quarantine of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020. I spent almost three months in my

apartment in New York City, with my mother and my younger sister, both of whom were also grieving. In the beginning, due to the severity of the virus, we hardly went outside. While we spoke to each other, and at times with others while wearing masks outside, I was mostly left to grieve alone. Martha, while living in the fictional world of *Black Mirror* and not the era of the coronavirus, is incredibly isolated in her own grieving process due to the geographical location of her home.

Before Ash died, he and Martha decided to move out of the city into Ash's childhood home in the countryside. As pictured in many landscape shots, there is not another house in sight. Following Ash's funeral, Martha spent most of her time, if not all her time, alone in the house until she decided to purchase Ashbot. Not only was she tasked with grieving alone at first, but then she was living alone with an artificial version of her husband. Ironically, the only person she talks to, in person, while isolated in the house after the funeral is the man who delivered the lifeless body that was transformed into Ashbot. The location of Martha's house ultimately contributes to her inability to cope with her husband's death, and most importantly, her desire not to differentiate Ashbot from the real Ash. She has been living in a delusional reality in which it is normal to live with an artificial version of her dead spouse. It is not until her sister unexpectedly drops by to visit her that she engages in a conversation with another human being. As the viewer, we learn that Martha has not been responding to any texts or calls from anyone, only furthering her isolation and lengthening her grieving process. It is as if she would rather remain enclosed within a world of make believe than face reality. This is indicative of many who struggle with grief, especially within the context of the passing of a loved one.

When her sister unexpectedly drops in to check on her, to see about her well-being, Martha urges Ashbot to hide in the bedroom. Following this short visit, on the way out of the

front door, Martha's sister says that she is happy to see that Martha is "moving on." Martha instinctively reacts out of fear, thinking that her sister must have seen Ashbot. Martha's sister discloses that she saw men's clothing on the floor; she assumes that Martha has decided to date, to move on with her life after Ash's death. Upon returning inside the house, Ashbot asks Martha what her "friend" had to say during her visit. Martha immediately gets irritated, stating, "You know her…she said she was happy that I moved on." Ashbot replies, "Moved onto what?" This short exchange shows us two things; not only does Ashbot fall short of her husband in his knowledge, such as his not being able correctly to identify her sister, but he also is unable to understand the nuance in the phrase "moved on." As he is not human, he cannot process this phrase, resulting in his question. This only deepens Martha's longing for Ash. Additionally, this exchange illustrates the impact of isolation on human beings. It is not until Martha interacts with another human being, her sister, that she realizes the absurd nature of how she has been living. In a time when Martha should have been grieving, surrounded by her loved ones such as her sister, she has been trying to enjoy the fantasy that she still lives with her husband.

Ashbot's misunderstanding of this phrase is only the beginning of his incapacity to pick up on social cues and mannerisms: he processes everything in the most literal sense. In the following scene, the evening after her sister's visit, Martha cannot sleep. She says that she knows that Ashbot, who lays beside her, moving his chest to rise and fall to simulate human breathing, is only faking. She asks him to go downstairs; but of course, that is not what she wants. As most humans do, we often say things we do not mean or mean things we do not say. In this case, Martha wants Ashbot to push back on her request for him to leave and go downstairs; however, Ashbot responds to orders and does so perfectly. Ashbot is not free in the Sartrean sense. For Sartre, to be free is to be other than we are. In fact, his essence precedes his existence. He is

already ontologically fixed; his being is already closed. There is no horizon of being other than he is. As Ashbot does not act autonomously; when his owner makes a request, he is programmed to complete said task. There is no freedom to deny the request.

When Ash asks for clarification on what he is supposed to do, Martha becomes infuriated. She screams, simultaneously pushing Ashbot into the hallway. She starts to hit him and push him. To understand why Ashbot ultimately disappoints Martha to the point of sheer rage, we can consult Aristotle's famously misquoted phrase "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."[31] The real quotation, "the whole is not the same as the sum of its parts" gives us insight as to why neither Ashbot, nor any other being, could ever replace her loved one. [32] The key difference in these two statements is that Aristotle never indicated that the whole was better than the sum of its parts, rather that whole and its corresponding parts are two entirely different things. For instance, it is not simply that Ashbot is "greater" or "better" than his original form, but rather that he could never be truly "whole" as he is a different, fragmented form of Ash. Aristotle suggests that the component of the soul is what makes a human so difficult to recreate, in any form. In this case, as Ash's soul could not be preserved on social media, there is no way that Ashbot could possess a soul.

Centuries later, Rene Descartes would argue that it is the mind and the soul that differentiates human beings from other nonhuman living things. Given Descartes' reasoning, Ashbot might initially pass as a human being, but is devoid of mind or a soul. Ashbot doesn't truly think, which is what, according to Descartes, something that a soul does. Ashbot simply does what he has been programed to do; he is complex, but soulless. While Ashbot might look like Ash, he does not possess a human soul, innate human feelings, or human instincts; he

[31] Aristotle, Metaphysics, 980a.
[32] Ibid.

operates to please his user, Martha, rather than to love her, like Ash once did. As Ashbot is inhuman, he lacks the genuine capacity to experience human emotions, particularly the capacity to love another human. Ashbot serves to fulfill Martha's need for love, but he is unable to organically love her as he lacks his own conscious volition. Although Martha may miss Ash's physical presence, the main thing she misses is Ash's soul, his intangible presence, which cannot be replicated or transferred. In her fit of rage, shoving and punching Ashbot, she begins to cry and yell out of frustration:

"You're not enough of him. You're nothing."

Martha, while frustrated by his presence, is not actually angry at Ashbot; rather, this is an outward expression of her grief. When grieving, strong emotions such as anger can be directed at the wrong individuals. In this case, while Ashbot was the cause of the argument, he is not the real reason she loses her inhibition and begins to hit Ashbot. Martha begins to grapple with the fact that her husband is gone, and no artificial version of him will even begin to compare to her memory of her husband. Ashbot will never be enough. After all, he is not free and cannot love her in the same way her husband once could. This being, Ashbot, standing in front of her is not her husband, but just an imagined piece of him.[33]

ON EDGE

As the episode ends, it is evident that Martha is slowly becoming entirely unable to tolerate Ashbot. When she first creates Ashbot in the bathtub, she is utterly shocked at his similarity to her late husband. Prior to noticing Ashbot's flaws, she seems to confuse the presence of Ashbot for the existence of her own husband. Thus, she becomes increasingly

[33] Richards, "Be Right Back and Rejecting Tragedy," 44.

frustrated as the artificial version of her husband falls short of her expectations. While she once thought that Ashbot could potentially "bring back" her husband from the dead in this artificial form, she finally understands that Ash is irreplaceable.

Martha ultimately chooses to take Ashbot to a cliff near her house, noting that it used to be a favorite, special spot in her relationship with Ash. Upon their arrival at the cliff, Ashbot initially jokes, screaming into the abyss, "Don't do it!" with reference to committing suicide. After he screams, he notices the disappointed expression on Martha's face, to which he replies "Seriously, don't do it." Based on her expression, he thinks that Martha wants to commit suicide. Martha then mutters that the *real* Ash would have figured out what she wanted by now. Once she instructs him to jump, she expects him to be upset and express sadness, or even fear, but he does not. This is another jarring reminder that Ashbot is not her husband; he is simply an artificial configuration of parts of who he once was online. She cries out, "See, he would have worked out what was going on. This wouldn't have ever happened but if it had, he would have worked it out." She begins to conjure memories of how her husband would have responded. Naturally, Ash, as a human, would fear death, and would stand on the edge of the cliff, begging and pleading not to jump. In contrast, as Ashbot does not understand the concept of mortality, he does not fear death as he isn't human. Martha can distinguish what her late human husband would have done in contrast to the unfit and nonhuman response from Ashbot. It is evident that what was once Martha's denial of her husband's death has now turned into rage.

Ashbot replies to Martha's cries about what her husband would have "worked out" with the phrase, "Sorry, hang on. That's a very difficult sentence to process." This statement, while ironic, furthers the divide between Ash and Ashbot. In this scene, Martha aims to articulate that Ashbot, or this version of her husband, could never be as intelligent or intuitive as her late

husband. Artificial intelligence may attempt to recreate correct, human-like responses; however, at the core, they will never compare to that of human beings. He says, "hang on," almost as if to show that he needs a moment to digest the situation, to evaluate how to go further. Ashbot then refers to Martha's words as difficult "to process," as if her statements, and the situation itself, were too much for him to evaluate in a split second. The choice of the words "to process" also reminds us of the fact that Ashbot is not human; he is a computer that "processes" information and responds appropriately.[34] Ashbot is programed to follow a clearly demarcated set of rules, all of which lack a shared lived experience. As human beings, when we reach for a cup of coffee, we simply reach for the coffee cup. There is no need to process the situation as it is intrinsic and instinctual.

Martha continues, telling Ashbot to jump off the cliff. Ashbot replies, saying that "I never showed any signs of self-harm or suicidal tendencies." This statement, spoken by Ashbot in past tense, is particularly notable because the use of the first-person pronoun, I, shows that Ashbot can mimic the real Ash. Following Descartes, without a soul, there cannot be a real "I" or "self." Ashbot cannot differentiate between himself and his predecessor, or his human form, Ash. This is evident in the use of the first-person pronoun "I." Following Descartes logic, however, we know that Ashbot cannot be a real "I" or "self" as he does not have a soul; he is a form of artificial intelligence. In an immediate, visceral response Martha makes the following four important observations:

> "Yeah well, you aren't you, are you?
> You're just a few ripples of you…

[34] As Hubert L. Dreyfus, a Heideggerian scholar and critic of AI, argues, "Thus what is most important and meaningful in our lives is not and should not be accessible to critical reflection. Critical reflection presupposes something that cannot be fully articulated." Critical reflection is the innate ability to understand the world around us through lived experience. Ashbot doesn't have the necessary background lived experience that allows human beings to reach for an object or respond to complex social settings without the prerequisite of needing to engage in artificial processing

> There's no history to you…
> You're just a performance of stuff that he
> performed without thinking,
> and it's not enough."

At this moment, Martha has two fundamental realizations. Firstly, she can differentiate between her deceased husband and his artificial counterpart. Secondly, she emotionally registers that her husband is dead. As a result of this epiphany, she reacts with anger and conviction. She recognizes that Ashbot is nothing more than a "ripple" of Ash's being, just one incomplete version of her husband. This version of Ash has not actually shared any memories with her. This version of Ash has never been to their favorite cliff before. This version of Ash was created out of fragments of videos and parts of memories uttered on social media.

Ironically, Ashbot replies to Martha's exasperated monologue with the phrase,

"Come on. I aim to please."

Arguably, the main goal of artificial intelligence in the twenty first century is to please its user, or, in other words, to serve a purpose. When Martha purchased Ashbot, she had hoped he would serve a purpose: to help her grieve. Instead, Martha ultimately wanted Ashbot to replace her husband; however, he was not programmed to replace Ash. Ashbot, lacking the lovable human imperfections that Ash once had, upsets Martha to the point where she would rather live in a world without Ashbot. Unlike her late husband, Ashbot is unable to sense genuine human emotion such as irony or exasperation; Ashbot is only able to mimic Ash's sarcasm, but he is unable to understand it. Thus, he doesn't understand why Martha would ever be dissatisfied with him. Upon initial glance at these statements, it may appear that Martha is infuriated by Ashbot's presence, or for falling short of her husband, but I would argue that this is nothing more than misdirected emotion, fueled by an immense amount of indescribable grief.

Grief is not linear; it comes in waves, crashing down on you when you least expect it. The traditional stages of grief may provide a framework for a standard grieving process but is any grieving process truly "standard" if everyone's experience with the death of a loved one is individualized?[35] Even the discourse surrounding "stages of grief" can fail to make sense of how an individual processes grief. The concept of "stages" can be so abstract that it does not encompass the complexity of grief. Grieving can take mere days for some, and a lifetime for others. My father died on January 26th of 2020; however, it was not until January 22nd of this year, two years later, that I finally processed and was able to register the permanence of my father's death. Nothing special happened that day, it had no significance in my life prior to this year. That's the worst thing about grief, you never know when, or how, it is going to come. For Martha, she needed to yell "you're not you" into an abyss to register her husband's death. For me, I needed one of my loved ones to state nothing more than the sentence: "Your Dad is dead." My ultimate catharsis was my ability to parrot back, "My Dad is dead." I spent at least a year of my life telling people that my father had died. I spent months trying to unearth every memory of my father. And I spent countless hours in therapy attempting to process such a great loss. But in the end, all it took was time; the time to be able to utter those four words, nothing more than a simple sentence, and hear them for the first time.

AFTER

The final few scenes of the episode transport us several years into the future, where we see that Martha has had a child. We are reminded that Martha was unknowingly pregnant at the

[35] Barone, James E. MD; Ivy, Michael E. MD Resident Work Hours: The Five Stages of Grief, Academic Medicine: May 2004, Volume 79 Issue 5.

time of Ash's fatal car accident. Eight years later, she is celebrating her daughter's birthday in the same isolated home in the countryside. From a close-up shot of the etchings of her daughter's height on a banister, we can see that Martha has chosen to name her daughter "Ash." The process of naming her daughter after her late husband could further serve as an indication of Martha's inability to "move on."

On her eighth birthday, Martha's daughter asks for an extra slice of cake to bring upstairs. Here, it is revealed that Martha has stowed Ashbot away in the attic; he is only seen on special occasions and weekends. While Ashbot may have a relationship with "his" daughter, it is unclear how long Ashbot has been locked in the attic. Martha is unable to confront Ashbot daily, but she is simultaneously unable to get rid of the physical representation of her loved one. It is as if she cannot kill Ashbot, or get rid of him, as it would be like reliving her husband's death. Martha continues to live in a world where Ashbot is mimicking human form, a constant reminder that her Ash is gone forever.

"Be Right Back," much like many other *Black Mirror* episodes, illustrates that an artificially intelligent being can never compare to a human being, particularly one who has recently passed away. While this episode raises many questions about the ability to create a physical representation of a human based solely on social media, it further explores the role of the grieving process as one that is necessary for human beings to experience. Martha is unable to cope with her partner's death, even after eight years, which the existence of Ashbot helps to alleviate. As per Aristotle's explanation of the parts of the whole, Martha cannot let go of Ashbot as he is composed of some of the "parts" of her husband; however, she also cannot live with Ashbot as he is unable to replace her husband. Sadly, she is trapped.

Technology can be beneficial to human beings while in the process of mourning in some regards, such as serving as a reminder of a loved one. However, this episode of *Black Mirror* hopes to teach us that our loved ones cannot be replaced by technology alone, particularly as we face our own individual and shared experiences of grief following the crucial loss of our loved ones. Technology is not enough. In fact, technology can prevent us from facing the truth of the reality of our loss. It is better to embrace the reality of our loss than to avoid it. There is courage and love in letting go even as we must keep our loved ones alive in our memories forever. The truth is that someday we will all die; that is our shared reality. So, while we still can, we must love unconditionally.

CONCLUSION

"Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced." – Søren Kierkegaard[36]

If I told you I did not fear death, I would be lying.

The first time that I became aware of my own mortality, aware of the fact of my death, I was petrified.[37] I lay awake in bed, struck by the degree to which I was able to feel the world around me. The sheets in my bed felt as though they began to seep into my skin. The walls of my room seemed to expand into oblivion. And the sounds of the city embraced an unfamiliar silence. Startled by my own mind, I jolted out of bed as my heart began to race, with the occasional heartbeat escaping its natural rhythm, lodging itself in my throat, causing me to gasp for every waking breath. This was my first fall into the rabbit hole of the unknown.

This rabbit hole has only deepened tenfold since my father died, but the absence of a concrete conclusion, regarding my own mortality, remains the same. The only thing that changes is the moment in which I am reminded that someday I, too, will die.

The last time I fell, face first, into the reality of my own mortality was this past week. Most days, however, it happens in my bed at three o'clock in the morning, when I am alone, confronted by the darkness of my own thoughts. Last week, for the first time, I experienced this confrontation in public. I sat in a packed, pitch black, movie theatre, with a group of my friends and my boyfriend to my right, an empty seat on my left. The movie, although irrelevant to my story, referenced a main character whose parents had died when he was young. He was only left with one friend, who nearly died at his expense.

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[36] Hipkissm, Robert A. Jack Kerouac, Jack: Prophet of the New Romanticism by Robert A. Hipkiss, p. 83 In the 1948 The Hibbert Journal: Volumes 46-47.

[37] George Yancy, "Facing the Fact of My Death," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), February 3, 2020, accessed March 22, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/opinion/death-religion-philosophy.html.

This is a very common story, and yet, it still sent me down the spiral. The spiral that one day I will be alone. One day, both of my parents, not solely my father, will be gone. One day, the last of my four grandparents will be gone. And one day, even my younger sister, will be gone. In a hundred years, almost everyone I have ever known will be completely gone. I will be alone, in that familiar darkness, with nothing other than my thoughts.

Black Mirror was the first television to ever send me down this very same spiral. The first episode I watched was titled "The Entire History of You." Amidst a childhood plagued by a difficult, and often absent, relationship with my father, I found solace in my limited memories. I remember when I first watched the episode, I was enthralled. I was curious to know what happened, following Liam's extraction of the grain, following the fade to black. I sat back, anxiously waiting for the next episode to answer my questions regarding Liam's fate. Netflix automatically played the following episode, which I discovered was titled "Be Right Back."

The episode opened with two completely new characters, in a completely new place. You might imagine my surprise, and my disappointment, once I paused the television, googled *Black Mirror*, and then googled the definition of the word "anthology."

How could the writers ever leave us on such a cliff hanger?

What happened to Liam?

Did he ever see his daughter again?

Did he go blind?

I was left with far too many unanswered questions. This is the moment that *Black Mirror* pushed me down the rabbit hole of endless existential questions. To distract myself, I decided to play the next episode of *Black Mirror*, with the hope that I might forget about all my unanswered existential questions. Big mistake.

"The Entire History of You" is the last episode of season one and "Be Right Back" is the first episode of season two. Although the characters in each episode differ, in an interview Charlie Brooker confirmed that all the episodes of *Black Mirror* exist within the same universe.[38] I think that the placement of "The Entire History of You" and "Be Right Back" is incredibly significant. "The Entire History of You" is an episode which primarily addresses the role of obsession, in relationship to memory, through an in-depth exploration of the grain technology. "Be Right Back" also explores the role of memory, in relation to grief, through the technology, or service, that created Ashbot. While the grain and Ashbot himself are not intrinsically linked, I believe that both technologies have the same goal: to preserve the soul, or the life of an individual, in a form of modern technology, inspired by memory. While the grain technology may not explicitly exist to "preserve a life" in the same manner that Ashbot attempts to replace Ash following his death, it certainly is a technology which consists of the sum of an individual's memories. Clearly the grain is a much more accurate depiction of an individual's life, as it is an exact copy of one's memory, rather than Ashbot, who is solely an aggregate of Ash's virtual presence. Even if the grain is an accurate depiction of an individual's life, it cannot replace a person.

Both episodes also explore the role of love, and longing, in relationship to memory. Martha's desire to replace Ash is triggered by her inability to grieve her lost lover following his death. On the cliff, Martha states "there's no history to you… you're… not enough." Ashbot ultimately fails her because he does not possess the same lived experience as Ash; he has no genuine recollection of their memories together. As she experienced these memories firsthand,

[38] Morgan Jeffery, "Charlie Brooker says Black Mirror season 4 'very explicitly' confirms shared universe theory," Digital Spy, last modified December 21, 2017, accessed March 17, 2022, https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/a845932/black-mirror-shared-universe-confirmed-easter-eggs/.

her emotions are attached to each memory of her husband. He is "not enough" because he does not share the same appreciation for their relationship that Ash once did. Similarly, Liam's desire to find proof of his wife's infidelity is triggered by his jealousy, but more importantly, it is fueled by his immense love for Fi, evident in the depiction of her in the final montage of the episode. Ultimately, Liam is "not enough" for Fi, evident in her ultimate decision to leave Liam and take their daughter.

Upon the realization that he was "not enough" for his wife, Liam goes mad, evident in his erratic decision to remove his grain with a razor blade. Liam loses both his wife and daughter to his obsession. Although Liam's wife and daughter have not died, he is still experiencing a profound sense of grief. Instead of grieving the loss of the dead, he is mourning the absence of his family, which is a type of death. In other words, this immense loss causes him to suffer in a similar way that one would after losing a spouse or a child to death. Of course, this form of mourning is not comparable to that of Martha's grief, which results from the permanence of Ash's death rather than his decision to leave her.

As a series *Black Mirror* often urges us to think of the role of technology in relationship to our own humanity. These two episodes in particular force us to think about how technology can corrupt intimate human relationships.[39] In both the development of the grain and the creation of Ashbot, *Black Mirror* reminds us that once we are stripped of our technology, we are left with only our existence. We are left amongst each other. The anthology definitively emphasizes how technology may be able to separate us, but to survive we still need human connection. In isolation, humans deteriorate, shown in both episodes when Liam and Martha lack interaction

[39] The two episodes are not the only episodes in the anthology that directly address the themes of grief, love, and memory. It is important to note that the critically acclaimed episode of season 3 titled "San Junipero" won two Emmy Awards. It would be remiss to not mention this episode as another an example of memory in *Black Mirror*. If I was given the time, and opportunity, to explore a third episode in the anthology, I would select "San Junipero.

with other human beings. Within the larger context of *Black Mirror*, these two episodes suggest that we are all intrinsically connected to one another, linked by an understanding of what makes us human, and most importantly, by our shared memories. Without explicitly stating so, *Black Mirror* urges us to put down our phones as, in our final moments, we will not cherish our technology, but we will cherish our memories.

The first time I spiraled after my acknowledgement of my impermanence, my mother told me that death was nothing more than a long sleep. It is like going to bed, she said, not realizing you have fallen asleep, unaware that you will never wake up. As I write this, I begin to feel the tears well up in the bottom of my eyes while thinking about my grandmother's eternal sleep, my mother's eternal sleep, my sister's eternal sleep, and my eventual eternal sleep.

After losing my father, I gained a greater appreciation for every moment, regardless of length or significance. I have learned to cherish the present, to understand that there is no such thing as a trivial day, minute, or even second, and to firmly grasp each moment before it slips away. I have slowly learned to recognize these moments even whilst they are happening, to try to see the moment through the eyes of my father's camcorder, and to engrain this memory in my mind forever.

The day my father died, I spent the afternoon alone with my grandmother at her house, the same house where my mother grew up. I sat on the floor of the living room in shock while my grandmother tried to get me to speak. I remember realizing that one day the house that had raised two generations would be no longer. In that moment, I was reminded of how important each moment is with a loved one, as you never know when you will experience your last. This moment with my grandmother, mere hours after my father died, is still so important. This moment where my grandmother wants nothing more than to talk to me about my father. This

moment is the one I will remember in ten, twenty, even fifty years. This is one of the moments that will be in my final montage before the lights go out for the final time. This is what matters, and this is what I will remember, and what will hopefully make its way into my forever sleep.

The only solace I find in this idea of the forever sleep is that it may be full of my dreams. Although my conscious mind may not permit me to recall memories of my father at the push of a button, in my dreams my mind has no limit. In my dreams, I sometimes live in a world where my father walks me down the aisle. Or sometimes I see my grandfather sitting in the first row at my college graduation, squeezing my ninety-one-year-old grandmother's hand, refusing to let go. And sometimes I even sit on the porch of my house in the country, watching my dog run around my backyard, that is somehow simultaneously located on East End Avenue in New York City. In this future, I know nothing about my life other than I am surrounded by the people I love, regardless of whether they are alive today.

My dreams are full of my best moments, favorite people and places, and my greatest hopes, all in the same place, regardless of their plausibility, and in absolutely no linear nature. In that moment, in my eternal sleep, I am at peace. I am content with my life and cannot fathom a world in which it ends. And the consolation that my forever sleep will be blissful and never ending, whether it happens at the age of one hundred, at the age of fifty-nine, or even tomorrow, is enough to let me sleep at night.

While this thesis was mostly inspired by my father's passing, it was arguably years in the making. I can trace my fascination with grief and death back as far as my memory permits. As I reflect on what little I can remember, I realize that my childhood fear that I had at the age of nine, in which a masked man would somehow scale the side of my building, break into my

window on the twelfth floor, and kill me and my entire family, was far from unreasonable. Rather, it was just the beginning of my understanding of my own mortality.

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