

## The Old You

So I'm up here with my best friend in the post-life-cosmos and we're talking about how our human bodies died. She goes, "Oh man, if you'd lived you would have loved it. I became this completely insane grandma; I dressed up as a witch and poured sand on my lesbian neighbors' doorstep, then drove a minivan through their garage door. Took a 2X4 right in the kisser."

She whirls and EnergyMorphs into what I recognize as my own Life-Grammy and says, spot-on, "Honey, shall we play some gin rummy?"

Then she morphs back into Melissa, laughing. She knows it riles me up when she does that. I've got 10 cycles on her up here and still can't EnergyMorph.

See up here Melissa can take whatever form she wants; me, I always have the form of a 16-year-old boy.

Melissa thinks it'd be easier if I had been on the planet longer, more time to let go of the past. My Grams says somewhere around age 80-90 is apparently when the Humanbrain is at its most powerful if the soul is willing. It starts letting go of all sorts of useless shit and becomes open to anything. Pure childlike openness combined with all sorts of accumulated wisdom—this astounding power trapped inside frail dying bodies with misfiring neurons, so only the individual knows they have it but can't communicate it, or won't. Then usually they (Poof!) disappear from the planet...

Which is all right. Imagine if everybody was floating around knowing they had this cosmic power.

Probably the biggest knowledge nugget we've got now is that there's an Energy that exists in everything, all the cosmos, our little infinity-slice up here, and even in the Void we don't really talk about. All that Energy is pretty malleable but can't be destroyed, can only be sent into that Void where there are forces and powers we're not yet equipped to understand. Melissa thinks the Void has something to do with the human concept of Arrogance, which I know firsthand is a total bummer.

Melissa says, "You know how it's always *after* something big and terrible happened that we went 'ahh sure, how didn't we see this coming?'"

I say, "Of course, story of my Human-life."

"Can we rewind again to the big scene of your demise?" We've watched this LifeFlash so many times but Melissa thinks there's something she's missed, something that's keeping me in my back-pimpled, 16-year-old form. Maybe even something I'm hiding from her. Every time I watch it it's like stepping back into the old me, just with a different viewing angle.

Oof. No matter how many times we do this I'm never prepared for the heartache. This is why they don't let you watch too many at once, somebody even concocted a slogan that floats by in the ether: Avoid the Void! Limit Your LifeFlashes!

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Ah, yes, there I am, the focus is sharpening. Troops, tanks, and gunships in the square by the library on Little River Turnpike: they're about to bring down my robot, and I'm the crazy one screaming, 'No! No! That's my girlfriend!'

There's dear ol' me, hanging on to serious anger and denial, especially after the mall gets hit with one of the thing's rockets and all those people are killed, but you can see my

brainwheels thinking: *Always kind of hated malls anyway. At least it wasn't a daycare center or something.* A tanker truck goes flying overhead and it slams into a CVS, huge explosion, but my numbness still holds strong: *No great loss really, there's one on practically every corner, and actually Kent works weekends there, so even better.* Something about the pandemonium appears to be hilarious to me. People really do scream nonsense and run in random directions when true disaster hits. How does opening your mouth and wailing help you in any way?

Melissa pauses the LifeFlash, says, "Kent? ... Kent..."

She starts the Flash back up as what appears to be LeadArmyGuy is screaming in my ear, "Kid, you really fucked this one up! Where in Hades did you even learn how to build a robot this big?!" My brainwheels ignore him and keep turning: *Ooh damn, there goes her right arm, and the Lego cannon (how the hell was I supposed to know she'd figure out how to actually arm the thing with real rockets?).*

But as her giant Lego head rounds the corner, a moment of realization spreads across my face. I'm standing on parched asphalt staring at explosions going off over the tree line, realizing that, while I have seriously fucked up, something quite unusual is going on.

Melissa pauses again, says, "God, shocks me every time how you were able to make it look just like me...except it's so mean looking."

She makes it play, and here comes the part I have indeed been hiding from her. At this moment, though, I'm feeling like tossing an impulsive curveball. Not really up for it today, all the effort that goes into hiding. I'm feeling like it'll be much easier to go slack and let it loose. Here goes, this sugary swell of anger flooding my brainwheels down there:

*If she'd just been totally honest with me, I don't think any of this would have happened. Apparently at age 16 a girl suddenly becomes too old for Legos, despite having collected them*

*since age 4, despite having built entire cities with the help of this here neighborhood boy, moi, who, sure, could frequently be seen conversing with his collie and several imaginary friends in the backyard that abuts her backyard. But I guess suddenly Legos aren't cool anymore—and certain people with cars are Quite fun to hangout with in the parking lot of a Wendy's. Would have appreciated slight honesty, is all: she just wants to be on her own at college, that I'm too young, that she's tired of staying inside playing Legos and just for once wants to fuck a football player. Whatever.*

“You big sneak,” Melissa says. “And so what if I wanted to fuck a football player?”

Oops.

“Son, it'd be a whole lotta help to us if you could figure out how to shut this monster off,” LeadArmyGuy is saying in the LifeFlash, snapping both Human-and Cosmos-me out of imagining Kent's burning body in what used to be that CVS over there. There's my mouth spouting off arrogant jargon about computer chips and artificial intelligence, asking LeadArmyGuy if he remembers seeing me on the Tonight Show after I won that national competition for building the robot that double-checks whether you turned the stove and other appliances off at night so you don't accidentally burn your house down.

Of course I know something else is up, that my giant robot girlfriend has gone rouge for unforeseen, potentially supernatural, reasons. But LeadArmyGuy is too busy taking cover from an uprooted McDonald's sign that LegoMelissa is now using as a kind of club. “I don't care how or why you built the thing, just shut it down or we're gonna take it apart with our good friend C4!” he shrieks.

Melissa pauses and zooms in on my eyes.

“I can’t prove it but there’s something about your eyes here, I can feel it. This is when you realized you put so much negative Energy into the robot.”

Melissa’s theory holds that, if we’re all just tight bundles of shifting Energy, then whatever we create gets infused with that Energy. If that’s the case it certainly makes sense that the LegoMelissa I built would have wanted to destroy the town.

Then the ending of my life we’ve both seen too many times to count: I nab some explosives from the confused Army guys and sprint toward the colossus, letting her scoop me up with her block hands. She holds me up for second, perhaps wondering if eating her creator is actually a good idea. Everybody down on the ground is tense, waiting for some heroic action on my part. LegoMelissa simply pops me into her mouth and everybody sighs as I disappear quietly into the belly of the beast.

But, just in time, LeadArmyGuy gets it and barks for everyone to get the hell away from LegoMelissa. She wobbles a bit and everyone’s holding their breath. Then...

Kablooey!

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“So wait,” Melissa says, “Kent Sagan. I’m remembering some kind of ritual thing.”

She’s keying up a new LifeFlash now.

It starts with Melissa and me, ages 16 and 13 respectively, winning First Prize at a science fair showing off our Lego robot, the one with a basic computer chip I’d designed to pick up my Dad’s discarded cigarette butts from our porch so he wouldn’t set the house on fire again. It played ripped-off C-3PO lines, recorded by moi: *My name is Legoman, human-cyborg relations*. Melissa says, “Wait why’s this coming up in a KentFlash?”

Well cue Kent in a later on LifeFlash at the science fair lying and telling everybody that his uncle was Master of the Cosmos himself Carl Sagan (and still everybody liked him because he was a *Washington Post* All-Met running back)—and now a montage of Kent feigning chivalry, helping Melissa take our poster board out to her car in the rain; me hanging back; Kent asking Melissa to the Junior Prom; Kent kissing Melissa in the rain; me waiting under a leaky awning while the janitors lock up, explaining I'm just waiting, that my ride is just getting her car; me payphoning home and Dad yelling that it's late and that the house isn't that far away; me walking home in the rain tearing Legoman's limbs apart.

Melissa's on to something; she brings up another LifeFlash, which I immediately recognize as the morning after that Junior Prom. I'm in the backyard with my collie when I hear some kind of rustling and my dog picks up a peculiar smell. I wander up near the fence and see Melissa sitting in the dirt still in her dress, which is lavender, and if you pause and zoom real close you can see I become physically incapable of breathing for a bit. She takes a pull from a joint and doesn't see me. I'm about to call her name but the words catch in my mouth when I notice Kent sitting next to her playing Wax On/Wax Off on her back.

Melissa pauses and zooms way in on my brain. We see all these vague polygonal shapes careening around, shapes of an infinite gradient of colors, and we're struck by the understanding that the disposition of these shapes is analogous to the way my brainwheels must have felt. She inches the timeline forward and we see darker gradients attaching themselves to one another, forming a massive polygon that's starting to blot out the more vibrant colors.

“Wow,” Melissa says, “It's like they're all little Yes-men ganging up in outrage.”

But suddenly the shapes of other gradients start to notice the imbalance of the darker polygons and kick into action, slowly binding to the dark massive shape. You can actually hear the faintest harmonic chord.

She zooms back out and in the LifeFlash my collie's licking my face, wagging his tail like a maniac. I wipe something out of my eye and head back toward my house, the dog running circles around me.

Melissa and I go, "Ahhh."

Next LifeFlash she brings up is just her, an undetermined amount of time later, standing naked in front of her bedroom mirror and cupping what are admittedly smallish breasts. Her brainwheels are caught in a loop, going: *I won't always be a surfboard I won't always be a surfboard I won't always be a surfboard...* There's maybe half a dozen two-foot tall Legomen on her desk that look a whole lot like Kent and are even dressed up in mini versions of his classic outfit—baggy jeans, white t-shirt, and untied tan Timberland boots.

Melissa is then out in her backyard spraying one of these RoboKents with Lysol and setting it on fire. We zoom way in on her brain and there it is again, a massive dark polygon. She sprays and lights another RoboKent, then little ol' me waddles up with a handful of M80s. I don't ask any questions, just suggest that we play suicide-bomber with 'em, then I strap one with the firework and set it in a crowd of the other RoboKents, and we watch Lego limbs and heads get blown apart in every direction.

I give Melissa a hug, and through sniffles she says, "Is it weird that part of me wants to string his guts across the school's main entrance, hoist his mutilated body up the flag pole, and let him rot?"

"It's real weird," I say. "But that's why I like you."

Then something strange happens.

Another LifeFlash starts up spontaneously, and it's some unknown time later. We're in Melissa's room and I'm making the suggestion that we could spread a rumor that Kent had raped her, or tried to, and she slaps me so hard that it leaves a handprint. Checking my face in the mirror I happen to notice a new RoboKent that looks like it's had a little more attention and care put into it. There are even painted facial features and it has taken up prime real estate on her dresser right next to the RoboLink and RoboZelda we'd built years ago. I had to admit to being incredibly confused.

"Hey Mel, I'm incredibly confused," I'm saying in the LifeFlash, wanting to know what happened to her awesomely gruesome idea from however long ago, ripping out Kent's guts, etc.

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A warning beacon cuts the LifeFlash off and we're sucked back out into the cosmos.

"Geez, that was kinda painful to watch," Melissa says. "A little late for an apology, I suppose?"

"Hey what does it matter?" I say, weirdly cheerful. "I've gotta be over it by now, right? Wouldn't I be in the Void if I weren't? If I wasn't? I still don't know which one to use."

Everything seems to sort of open up and loosen for a moment.

Then...

*Yeah are you really over it you fuck?!*

Whoa. Well...there's that I've been trying to hide, too. I have these quick lightning-spasms of doubt every little bit, and it makes me pretty unsure if I am totally over it, which



makes me nervous. I'm kind of clueless as to what's going on really, all I know is we're soaking our entities in a dangerous amount of nostalgia.

I suggest that maybe we should talk to my Grammy; whenever I've got that tip-of-my-tongue type feeling, like we're close to hitting something instrumental, I think of her. The neat thing about grandmas in the cosmos is that they're just as sweet as when you were a kid, believing everything you do has some righteous purpose beneath it. Basically, they believe in a You that even you can't see sometimes.

Grammy's out way over in her own special cosmos-corner in a bed of nebulae, and to get there we have to go through an asteroid belt, which is where everybody goes to gossip. Melissa wants to stop in for a little face time with the local joes, which is like one big awful high school reunion. But you get good info. Folks who can will morph into their former selves and gab about a lot of nonsense, but every so often there's an occasional interesting galactic nugget. Plus Melissa, who's a top-shelf EnergyMorpher, kind of likes to fuck with the entities here a bit.

"Hey look it's a Boy Wonder, floating ethereally to grace us with all his presence." That'd be Coach Benson, who was only slightly less annoying in real life than his protégé Kent.

"At least he's up here at all, you sorry excuse for one of my turds!" says Melissa, who has EnergyMorphed into Coach Benson's old man in military fatigues. "We were just talking about yer boy Kent—don't see much of his dumbass up here these days, huh?"

Benson stands up real straight and goes, "Yes, sir, that'd be correct."

"Any thoughts as to his whereabouts?"

"No sir, uh I don't actually recall the last time I saw him."

“Benson,” says Drill Sergeant Benson the Elder/Melissa, “How’s about you get yer dogshit outta here and tell me the truth? Making yourself look like a jackass in front of all these people. You wouldn’t wanna do that, would you, you miserable nincompoop!”

“No sir I don’t suppose I would...Sir!”

“Good, now let’s hear the actual truth. I’d like to talk to Kent.”

Coach Benson fidgets a little and some other folks morph out of Human-form so they don’t have to look anyone in the eye. “Well sir, I’m afraid he was banished just this cycle actually. I think he got caught watching a few too many LifeFlash loops of himself in that old state championship game.”

“Well it had to be more than just watching it, I mean we can all watch ‘em,” says Elder Benson/Melissa.

“Right, uh sir, but there’s something that, um, *knows*,” says somebody who has morphed into a real elegant tulip.

“Knows what, pretty boy?” Melissa barks.

“Sir, it knows what you’re feeling, or actually I guess *if* you’re feeling I think is the better way to say it. That’s not welcome up here, holding on to human stuff like that, sir. It creates some problems on levels I’m not nearly equipped to understand or really even think about, sir.”

“Sir, if I might ask this young man here a question--“

“Benson, don’t you speak another word to my compadre,” Drill Sergeant Melissa says with a little less authority.

“Sir, I’m only interested in how this young man came to know my father, he looks awfully familiar...”

Just then Melissa morphs back into herself and sticks her tongue out at Coach Benson. This gets him all riled up of course and he hucks a small Moon at us, so we flee for the cover of a red dwarf.

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When we get to Grammy she's Greta Garbo and admiring her reflection in a passing comet. She morphs back as we approach and becomes the picture of grandmas everywhere, sitting in a rocking chair, knitting and having a highball.

I get maybe three thoughts out before it practically smacks my forehead that Grams just *knows*. It's in that twinkle in her eye, she knows everything we've been up to, and possibly knows everything as far as I can tell.

She's laughing and already shuffling the cards for gin rummy when she says, "Well it seems over cycles there's come this prevailing notion that human emotions have zero place up here, which isn't exactly the case. There's this thing about a general consensus generally being...well, not necessarily wrong, just not coming from the right angle. You're wondering about old souls getting whisked away to what everybody calls the Void, right? As if the Void's a bad thing? As if it's an evil thing? As if evil is actually even a thing at this level?"

Grammy's dealing and gesticulating like wild. When I was little I'd try to cheat by not discarding; she'd always catch me holding like 12 cards and would silently hold up this extra card in the deck that just said "Play By The Rules" across the top.

"Everybody's Human-life had specific turning points, really infinite points actually, where things could have gone in myriad directions—that's just kind of the nature of Energy. We're all these constantly shifting bundles that can't, no matter how hard we try, stay in one

state. Even you”—she points at me—“you might look the same on the outside, but inside you’re bouncing around like nobody else. I can see it.

“Anyway, so specific points for one reason or another had more profound impacts on us, they got stamped in a little harder I guess you could say. Especially things that happened when you were young and a little more malleable.”

I like waiting for face cards; the Queen of Spades is my favorite but she rarely pops up.

Melissa says, “Whoa I think something just clicked: So the LifeFlashes are part of a process of re-watching and re-experiencing things?”

“She’s a smart cookie, you should stick with her,” Grammy says. “If you experience something over and over you start to take the power away from it and convert its energy into something else. Poof. It seems simple. It just either takes a lot of time or a lot of guts because the really profoundly bad memories created an imprint that went deeper than flesh. Melissa here is a little further along the path than you are because she had more Human-time to re-experience the memories, and by the time she got here most of ‘em had already vanished into positive Energy.

“Folks who get sent to your ‘Void’ are the ones who think they could change the outcome of what happened. It’s not a bad thing; it just means they need a little help. Most will make their way through their LifeFlashes eventually, traveling along the path. But some get stuck, and fill up on too much of their old ego-Energy. Way too much nostalgia, wishing for chances to go back and change things, arrogantly *knowing* they could do it, which is kind of like riding a motorcycle blindfolded in the rain all hopped up on cocaine. The only thing you actually do is hurt others—and that’s what has been happening to you, unfortunately.”

At this I look up from my cards and Grammy is tapping the rest of the deck. She knows I'm waiting for the Queen again, passing up plenty of game-winning rummies for what is most likely at the bottom of the deck.

"You know how you were hiding certain memories from Melissa?" Grammy says, and I'm not at all surprised that she knows. "Has it ever occurred to you that others would be able to hide from you?"

Kent—I don't know why I never thought of it, probably because I never wanted to think about it. Just then I have a memory spasm, the tiniest idea-hiccup of what exactly he might be hiding from me. I'd much rather not think about it, that's for sure.

"So we have to go to the Void?" Melissa says.

"Well *you* don't, but it might make it easier on him," Grammy says to her. "You could wait, and that wouldn't in any way reflect poorly on you," she says to me. "Kent will get through it eventually. But the thing about hiding is that we're exceptionally good at it."

Grammy goes Gin with no sign of my Queen.

"Oh I'm going with him; how are we supposed to get there?"

Grammy laughs this huge supernova burst and says, "Oh it's so easy, all you have to do is ask. Just remember: you won't be allowed to leave until you let it all go. It takes a lot of guts."

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I don't really want to go.

Well that isn't entirely true. I do. I'm tired of feeling this way, knowing exactly the memory I've been deceiving myself into avoiding so that Kent could bury it away. I know I never put up a fight when he took it away from me.

Try this with yourself sometime when you're feeling bad and can't quite put your finger on what's wrong: Eliminate all distractions, I mean everything, hide blindfolded in a closet, and Think. Hard.

Deep down, you always know.

We're suddenly in Melissa's old basement, tiny humans standing in a vast Lego City I remember building the first weekend we met. The only sound is some rhythmic wailing and strange sucking sounds from far off; it's either a person crying or a vacuum cleaner.

Melissa's pinching my bottom to get me to move faster in the direction of the sound, which I both do and don't want to be near.

Around a corner is an IMAX-sized frosted-glass window, through which we see Kent sitting in a kind of a grotesque Lotus—it looks like his legs are being held in that position by a series of invisible clamps and vice grips. He's surrounded by an Infinity of video screens.

Kent doesn't move an inch when we stroll in and sit next to him, and I immediately tear up upon seeing my old collie on one of the screens.

Melissa grips my hand and we're vortexed directly into the LifeFlash:

It's one of those winter mornings you'd much rather stay tucked into your seven fraying wool blankets. Instead, I'm at the bus stop on top of a hill hiding inside my coat, which leaks when it rains. I can see down the hill to my house and Melissa's house, and can watch as she jumps down her front porch through the rain and into Kent's black Ford Probe as it pulls up.

My eyes wander away, hoping to save my heart the anguish, and land on my collie, who has inexplicably escaped my house and is wandering the neighborhood in the rain. The bus will arrive any moment and so I run down the hill toward him, except my lovely dog believes I'm

playing a game and runs in the opposite direction like a maniac who's been set on fire. I'm a little frantic and feeling the weight of something else so I make things worse by chasing him instead of firmly calling him to get back inside.

I see the next several moments as if through a rainy car window.

Kent's Probe lurches around the corner just as my collie bolts one more time, so car and dog make a sickening proof of a fundamental axiom of physics on a boring suburban street. Melissa zooms way in on the moment of car-and-dog impact and sees what I've put so much energy into forgetting: her mouth locked to Kent's and her hand on his pants, his left hand barely on the wheel—the things not even my entity can forget in a place where time doesn't exist.

But as I'm starting to feel the worst I've felt since Life, I suddenly get the feeling like Melissa propping her chin on my shoulder, and she's saying that we've gotta watch it again, as long as it takes.

I helped get you into this mess, she says, and now I'm gonna find a way you get out.

And we watch and we watch and we watch and we watch.