

Striving for Neverland

&

I have a dream —
well, actually it's probably more of a nightmare —
I'm 30-something and in a nicer hotel room than I've ever been in, and there are a lot of pills.
I don't know if they're my medication or party drugs or what, but I'm dead.
The first time I woke in a cold sweat that I couldn't shake.
It came back. I mentioned it to a friend.
It comes and goes now. It morphs.
It's a ~~dream~~ a nightmare déjà vu the future.
Terminal velocity right up to a crash landing.
Start to finish, hard and fast. I'm going out with a bang.

&

In 2021 Netflix released a movie adaption of Jonathan Larson's autobiographical musical *Tick, Tick... Boom!* I was cautiously optimistic; I was already a fan of the source material and Larson's work, and Lin-Manuel Miranda directed it! but, it was the age of the dodgy movie musical...

I watched it start to finish the day it came out, let the credits play through. Then I pressed play again.

I watched it four times in the week it was released. And once more the week after that. And I haven't been able to bring myself to watch it again since.

Set to an ominous metronome, Larson's original play opens as his 30th birthday approaches: "The sound you are hearing is not a technical problem. It is not a musical cue. It is not a joke. It is the sound of one man's mounting anxiety. I... am that man."

"And I want to get some writing done but I keep hearing those tick ticks. And sometimes after a couple of them, I'll hear something else - a distant BOOM, like a bomb has gone off not too far away and the next one might be closer and I'd better look out."

This is an almost prophetic opening to a show: Jonathan Larson died at 35 of an aortic dissection the night before the first Broadway preview of his magnum opus, *Rent*.



I struggle to look at this image and see Jonathan for what he is: a man who is mere hours away from achieving his life goal, but even fewer from his untimely death.

I struggle to look at this image because my brain says: if he could die so suddenly, so could you.

&

(Enter: me)

I spent 17 and 18 burnt out and depressed and (unhelpfully) on a series of wrong medications. I didn't want to die, I just didn't want to live where I was – I wanted to skip all the suffering and work I'd have to put in to therapy and more trialling of medications, to one day wake up in some magical far-off future where it *wouldn't* be some outstanding feat if I managed to brush my teeth or wash my hair. I spent a month – more? less? – doing little else than sleep.

But now? That far-off future is here. And I'm waiting for it to start. And

(someone's calling from the wings — it seems I've missed my cue)

... shit.

&

A week before my 21st birthday, I write an email. It's 4am and, from either stress or heat or a combination of the two, I find myself awake and laying on the cool tiles of my bathroom floor. The addressee is an advice podcast. Knowing that the tone of my email is far too heavy to ever be answered on this comedy show, I take advantage of this effectively anonymous, no-pressure dumping grounds and give my brain some room to breathe:

though i understand that i am still young, i cannot escape the impending doom i feel when considering the mortality of my youth. how do i become incredible at everything while im still young ?

&

I search for answers. Google provides.

[Famous authors who died at an early age](#)

illness.

[Desperately young: artists who died in their twenties](#)

suicide.

[Artists who Died Young - Themes in Art](#)

accident.

Dead at 27: Why Highly Creative People Die Young

crime.

Names, causes, and faces rattle around my head with reckless abandon.

Of course, I don't have to look to the recognised and recognisable – these statistics are still just as present in the wider population. Of course, I know these early deaths are in the minority. But my profoundly human brain wants to make sense of it all. It hears the ticking, and, fearing the unknowable nothingness, it searches for data. It finds something knowable and clings on for dear life. It seeks out facts and arranges them into truths:

Fact: The world is full of artists whose time was limited.

Truth: Your time is running out.

&

I listened to Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* for the first time shortly after it won all its awards, and just like everyone else in 2016, I fell in love. I listened to the album all the way through at least twice a day for a month straight. Throughout the show, Hamilton is constantly asked by everyone around him, "why do you write like you're running out of time?" He was – he died in a duel at 47.

In 'My Shot', Hamilton sings, "I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory". Lin calls this the most autobiographical line he's ever written; he relates to Hamilton: "The ticking clock of mortality is loud in both our ears, and it sets us to work."

Lin-Manuel Miranda started writing his first Broadway musical aged 19. He won a Tony award for it in 2008. He was 27.

(tick... tick...)

I'm running behind.

&

I message my parents. Dad responds:

14:00

if you died today would you be satisfied that you'd lived a successful life

i'd be dead .

ok if someone told you you had 5 minutes til you died then

shit !

like i'm sure you'd feel ripped off
but would you feel like you'd done
something at least

theres always things people
wished they had done just hadnt
got there yet

i've had children. and survived.
and i've had children and survived

lol

14:21

what is a successful life. ?
mmmmm ponderous

balanced against personal aims
and 'achievement'(whatever
they are OR judged against some
other higher ethical or capitalistic
standard ???

i got to the end of Super MARIO
Brothers on the SNES is that helps

bye gotta go be sucessfull

(stupid question)

Mum responds later:

16:49

Ok. Yes because there is no point in thinking otherwise.

It's impossible to experience even a fraction of what the world has to offer but I've seen enough and anything more I get is a bonus

&

7 — Someone told me to say yes to everything – when opportunity comes knocking, it might never come again. No one told me not to take that literally.

11 — 12 — 13 14 15 — there's a dread creeping in... push it away. Too much to do, not enough time.

16 — I go to fourteen orchestra rehearsals a week. I have a 97% attendance rate at school. I don't stop. I don't sleep.

Billy Joel comes to me through Ben Platt's angelic voice; "You're gonna kick off before you even get halfway through / When will you realise, Vienna waits for you?"

17 — pushing pushing pushing.

18 — I skip most every rehearsal. I stop going to school. I suddenly, and for the first time, hit the brakes. Hard stop.

19 — Back on track? Let's go, let's go, let's go!

20 — Too much to do, not enough time. I try to remedy this. TV to my left, assignment to my right, breakfast in my lap.

21 — I edge towards burn out as the cycle starts again.

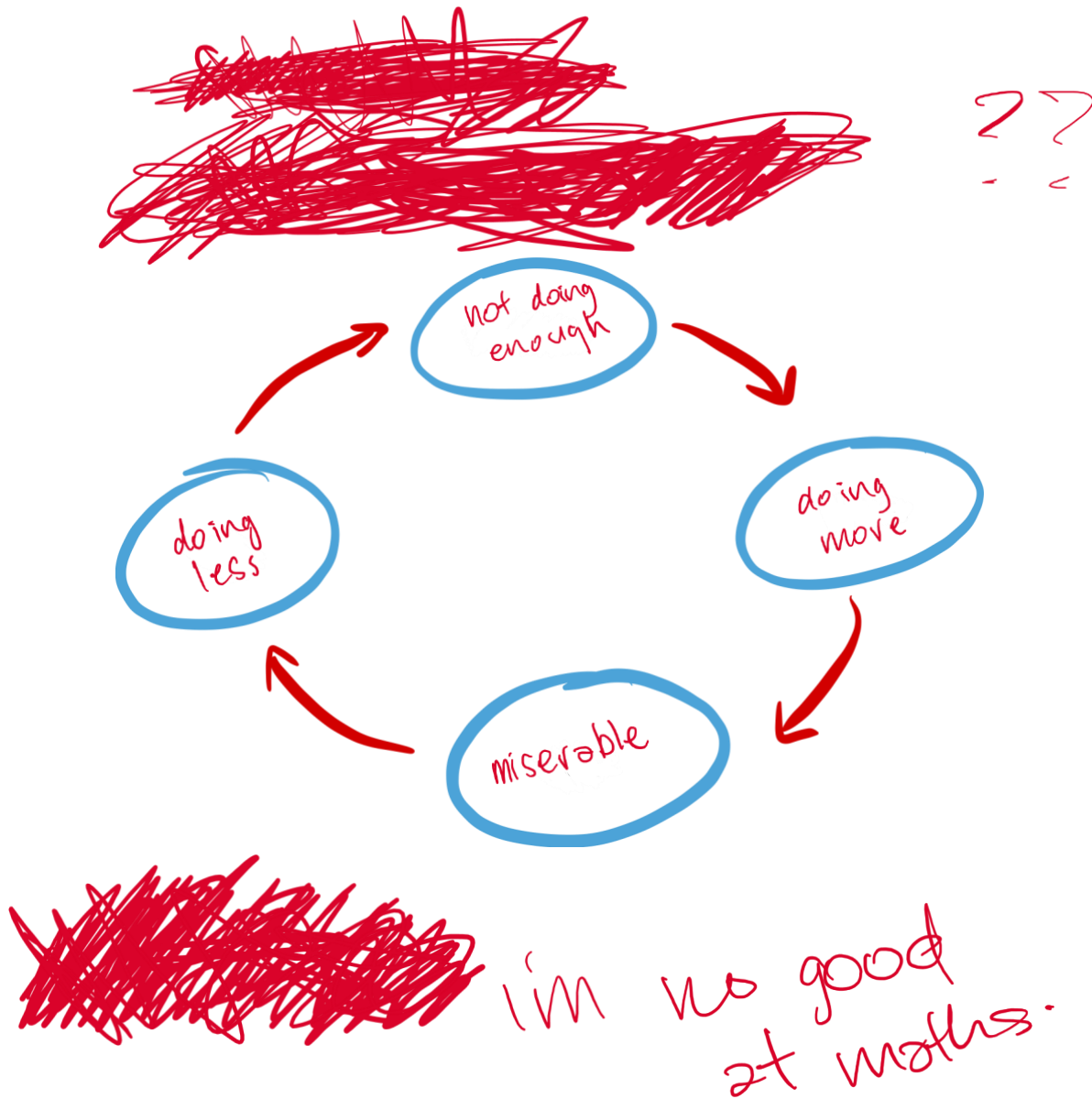
&

EXAM QUESTION:

Traveller A moves at an indeterminate speed towards an unknown destination. Traveller B follows behind but moving quicker. After twenty-one years, Traveller A realises that this is a race *→ and A can never win-*

How far does ~~Traveller A~~ ^{fast do i} have to move ^{to feel fulfilled} before ~~Traveller B~~ ^{death} catches up?

Show your work.



&

There is an essay written by Amy Krouse Rosenthal on turning 40: “If one is fortunate enough to live to 80, that’s 29,200 days on the planet. How many more times, then, do I get to look at a tree? 12,395? Absolutely, that’s a lot, but it’s not infinite, and I’m thinking anything less than infinite is too small a number and not satisfactory.”

Amy heard the ticking, I think. “How many more times do I get to cut an apple?” she asks. “To wake up? Run inside after getting drenched in the rain?”

This is the ticking I’ve been trying to get rid of,

how many more words will I get to write?

how many more things will I get to create?

will it be enough?

Amy hit 40 and the ticking got louder. She died at 51 of ovarian cancer.

Did she feel she had made enough?

&

I think these deaths stick to my brain because I can see that they had success – tangible evidence that their presence was worthwhile. But is that what constitutes a worthwhile life? A life lived *enough*?

At 21 I look at what I'd leave behind. No, it's not supposed to end yet. It's not *supposed* to. And statistically it probably won't. But if it did?

I look at what I'd leave behind and find a series of works-in-progress, stops made on the way to some destination I've yet to reach.

Is that it? Is that the sum of my parts? Nothing to point at shouting "That was me! I did that!". Nothing worth it – not yet.

Can I call myself a writer while I'm not writing?

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around // if I die tomorrow, was I ever *really* here?

Can I call myself anything at all?

&

Hey Google, me again.

life expectancy australia

life expectancy australia women

There are a lot of numbers

83.3

86

82.8

85.4

none of which I understand.

none of which make me feel any better.

&

I've never struggled to accept that there would be books I'd never get to read, songs I'd never hear, shows I'd never see. But I still feel kind of robbed that I'll never get to see every country. I think of the song 'Maps' from *Fun Home*, a musical adaption of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, in which a young Alison sings, "I can draw a circle / you lived your life inside".

I drew mine.



(tick... tick...)

Alison Bechdel is still alive. Her father, the subject of this line, is not. Bruce Bechdel stepped in front of a truck aged 44.

&

I get home, unlock my door after

groceries uni work doctor

and all my brain can think to do is put on some trackpants and roll into bed. It's

17:01 13:17 20:44 10:38

and my head hits the pillow and I'm stuck thinking of all the things I could be doing instead

write write write write!!!

I think of the masterpiece I should be making, should've made, by now.

I think of all the time I'm wasting

and I curl further into my sheets.

&

I spent 17 and 18 burnt out and depressed. Wishing for this far off future.

But I'm 21 and I'm here and it's a paradox.

desperate to stop and take a breath, take some time to gather my thoughts

desperate not to slow down, power on through in case I'm running short on time

Find the balance, I'm chanting, find the balance.

I just need a second, ok?

And I need the world to wait for me.

&

The *Hamilton* cast sing, “and when my time is up, have I done enough? / will they tell my story?”

And still, my throat gets tight.

&

Billy Joel sings “its alright, you can afford to lose a day or two.”

I listen again and again.

A day becomes a month becomes a year...

(becomes a life?)

&

Amy Krouse Rosenthal writes “I was here, you see. I was.”

&

Mum messages me:

18:37

Just be Mabel. It's all you
have to be.

&

Stephen Sondheim writes in *Company*, “Add ‘em up, Bobby. Add ‘em up.”

(Add ‘em up, Mabel. Add ‘em up...)

&

Stephen Sondheim died in 2021. He was still working on a new show.

He was 91.

A Theater Mania article about his death says, “it’s true with most writing that you never really finish, you just run out of time.”

Tick... tick...

Lin-Manuel Miranda is 44. *Is*. He continues to work just as relentlessly as ever.

Dad messages:

There is never an endpoint

&

Jon’s turning 30 singing, “Boom! You’re passé / What can you do?”

&

I remember myself.

I’m 21...

&

it isn’t over yet.

&

So, Google gives me an endless list of dead writers, artists, makers. People who lived. Past tense. If I read a thousand stories, learn a thousand lives, can I slot myself in? Do a thousand stories add up to even one answer?

So much to do. Not enough time. Never enough time.

I have spent 21 years asking wrong questions, searching for answers that don’t exist. I go now in search a balance – living every day like it’s my last, but still planning that there will be tomorrows, hoping there will be many of them.

Tick... tick...

...

Nothing yet. But we’ll see. Check back with me tomorrow.