Immortality

And The Inquisitive Boy

By Raymond Howell

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Authors Note

This is a streaming conscious short story involving a moment in a young boys life and as he saw it than, his ailing Grandpa.

It is not a mystery so it has no discernible plot, it is simply a journey from a boy's connection with his future adult self, to that adult self.

Immortality And The Inquisitive Boy

Section One

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An awestruck but quietly issued sigh, "Oh, to be immortal," passed an inquisitive boy's lips to be followed immediately by an internally ringing, 'Imagine all the things I could do if I was...'

That long, slow, sigh struck the air in a gush of emotions while the immortal-super-hero's film the boy watched in the local cinema inexorably, punch and kick by toothy smile and flirty pose climbed towards its thrilling climax, only for the final moments to be spoilt by scenes of sloppy kisses, over-white smiles and insincere acting shamelessly splattered with hints of a sequel.

For once the inquisitive boy was too spellbound to murmur 'pack that muck in and give us more CGI'. Or to note that the enthralled sigh wrapped in strong wishes for a certain future for another was indeed a sigh to surpass all others. If that clever inquisitive boy had bothered consciously to note the sigh's birth, he might well have asked of it, 'please be a magic spell'. But the sighs issue was reflective and instinctive and so bore little if any magic, merely traces of its primitive origin, a simple but strong compelling need to be. But zinging as he was how could the boy not be aware that he was alive? So, the boy released from needs to ponder on life or sighs was free to indulge a want to stare in wonder at the film's last moments.

The effect of the of the unexplored emotive sigh was comparable to a certain butterfly fluttering in a fabled clearing in an ancient area of a special least explored wing of an only just surviving part of an old magical
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rainforest. Left peacefully to flutter the boy's butterfly-sigh took to the air to join those others of a similar kind released during the screening regardless of the issuer's social status, race, or the confusing muddle of gender assignments. His special but late-arriving flutter nudged the mass and set them flying off once again around the cinema upon an updraft created from those believable ideas suggested during the film that immortality can be gifted, and that such people walk amongst us daily. The combined longings heated the auditorium's atmosphere and in doing created an even greater updraft. Had the boy's usual inquisitiveness noticed it may well have kicked him into considering that alchemist's dream of achieving perpetual motion. But just like the rest of the audience he was intellectually blind to any such ideas, but just like the delayed release of his sigh his blindness had nothing to do with distractedly nibbling popcorn or slurping soda. There was another emotion at play which overlaid everything as well as adding an extra something into the sigh and his wonders.

'If we all wished for it hard enough might we evolve to attain immortality?'

Section Two

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The boy's wonder was not dissimilar to thousands upon thousands of delicately balanced sighs whose wings will arise from cinemas globally and beat with the same intense rhythm, 'Oh, to be immortal'. While leaving in their mysterious wake a series of regrets and the disappointed ambitions of the old, or the poor for a timely scientific discovery to help them realise that dream. Or at the least allow them to outlive cantankerous neighbours as some sincerely wish.

In the cinema and in contrast to those fluttering sighs a few less awestruck ones could be sensed or heard at intervals arising from the back-row stalls from would-be lover’s when their partner decided the film was far more interesting than… you know… munching lips. Or most like, the heroes were for the film-makers had knowingly cut the ropes of political obscuration and buried it deeply when they chose the actors. Or rather the idols as all concerned had prayed and furiously connived to promote. Regardless of the makers efforts, ideas of salacious yearnings had soared over the young inquisitive boy’s tilted head, just as he also resisted eating and drinking during the film for fear of missing a single moment.

His Grandpa less constrained by the film had happily swallowed both their sodas and at that very moment was answering liquids compelling need to keep on with its journey to reach the sea and then the clouds and back down again. Consequently, he was rushing towards the toilets as fast as his ageing bones, softened muscles, shortness of breath and the audiences reluctantly moved knees would allow. At another time the boy would have smiled or teased, ‘serves you flipping right Grandpa’, but he was far too busy
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devouring those last few blessed seconds of celluloid to notice. Sensing this was indeed the end of the film and having issued his epic sigh the boy finally began nibbling the long-ignored, hand-warmed popcorn while about him a special part of the sigh still wreathing his spirit like a difficult to shift marsh ghost snickered, “Change my boy is inevitable.”

Had Grandpa been at his side and sensed the moment he might well have understood the ghost just as the newly emerging hairs on the boy’s arms did but they were not yet for the telling. So, his late and slightly mysterious sigh hung in the air like those others while adding its own touch of expectancy and uncertain purpose into the atmosphere. But also within the sigh was an unexplored hope that had set him tingling while the sense was strong enough to keep him planted firmly in his stall watching the film’s credits roll and continue staring hard as the lights slowly flickered on. The rising light did not disconnect him from ideas of immortality because the word shone from the screen as if knitted into the very fabric which the boy as he does most things noted and wondered fleetingly about it.

Is the word immortality written into all things at a genetic level? And does that create the urge which encourages life to evolve?

And then…

Does everything seek immortality?

‘Maybe it does’ he thought sagely only for a childish irk to momentarily stunt the newly emerging hairs on his arms. ‘No…, not everything does, cos me flipping toys break blimming too easy so how can they last forever’.

Then another little twinge but more adult in origin activated an itch in a certain region as if another new hair was making its presence felt. Whatever the cause it encouraged a misty and difficult-to-grasp idea to rise. Had it

possessed more substance and was willing to remain long enough to be explored properly it might well have revealed the cause of the hope that had ambushed the boy’s sigh. But instead, it merely flickered for a quarks sense of immortality in a brief moment formed not by words but by a subconscious sprinkling of life’s water on a special seed while an innate but slowing blossoming knowledge was trying hard to shine and help it grow.

Section Three

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Although there was no obvious eureka moment urging it on the quark shot along the halls of that insubstantial but powerful realm of the spirit where quietly but remorselessly it began eating at the lid of the container holding the boy's slowly developing adult regrets and those shortly to become confusing longings. As destined as such feelings are to arise and confound the future his were set on arriving a tad early where like the finger of doom they will point at that one person who has truly ever been his friend and trusted confidant and more of a caring parent than his have ever been - as well as a general conspirator in matters of fun and jinks - his all-knowing and caring but ailing Grandpa. To that developing adult angst it was obvious Grandpa was not going to live forever and so the boy's link with the film was cemented with a fervent wish to be the one to find a way for Grandpa to keep going for as many years as possible, maybe even forever.

So there this emerging seedling sat caught in the glowing rays of that new immortal sun where a few adjusting blinks and the slow passing up of popcorn to feed almost still lips was the only sign of movement, just as it was for the larger part of an equally enthralled audience. In common, they all seemed to be staring as if hypnotised by the glow of the word immortal which in various hues and tones they too saw it etched into the otherwise now blank screen. Some even willed the film to start playing again, while a few hoped it might play on forever, but just make sure to keep the popcorn and soda coming… And who gives a fig if we're sat in our filth? Even the inquisitive boy's heart whose beat was so often different to the one driving his peers was popping with a similar rhythm - immortality yes, immortality yes… and on it went with no sign of being spent.
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Also and surprisingly for one so conscience of environmental issues, he was not concerned about the possibility of mountains of human detritus growing and heaving around his young knees. For the sake of rewatching the film, he would happily cast into oblivion such concerns and even dare to ask Grandpa if he can spare him a packet of his, ‘I-keep-these-things-in-my-drawer-just-in-case-I-need-them’ diapers. But before that thought could evolve further a testy mood originating from a sweeping of awaiting cleaners arose, but not butterfly-like. It irrupted angrily like disturbed crows, effectively unsettling the air urging a few people to reluctantly stand, their sudden movements creating ripples which carried the crows caw around the cinema to encourage even more to react.

Those less transfixed by super hero’s and immortality and tight skimpy attire leapt to their feet to hastily trample over the carpet of spilt popcorn and drink cartons jumbled with carelessly tossed sweet packaging, hot-dog wrappers and all the other collective spills and discards of the thoughtless affluent. That included the odd wallet slipping from a pocket. Its tumble swirling the ripples into a wreathing pit of anguish to produce an unforgettable moment for someone - hours of stress that will take on their own form of immortality. While for another, the finding will be equally unforgettable. Their moment of joy or uncertainty that will slip into the immortal realm to be summoned occasionally back to the mortal world with the invocation, “Do you remember when I found that wallet…”

Section Four

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As for that charging phalanx, in their efforts to gain the exit first, en masse they barged rugby style through the loitering bodies of those less driven by an ancient need to reach the food source first, the local burger bar. But otherwise, for the briefest of moments 150 people or so, including those who had yet to discover they were missing a wallet, were united by similar wishes. To live forever. To be immortal. To be all-powerful.

So, duly inflamed, they left the cinema but for most the further they trod from the celluloid lure the effects of the embedded CGI waned. Soon they will shake off the films spell and return to work or school and take up once more a want to rebel. Some might astutely name their temporary sense of euphoria, 'the despot's syndrome', 'a politician's dream', 'a surgeon's drive', 'a scientist's broil' or simply 'fools gold'. But for some an urge for immortality might fester until it drives them forward to create their own forever forever, like so many destructive despots have. Or the feelings might cause the disillusioned to rush out and buy countless cartons of cigarettes and litres of hard alcohol or drugs - "Let those things take me off because life is bad enough without extending the bloody thing."

That is if some can ever recover from the loss of their wallets.

The boy’s altruistic reasons for wanting to discover immortality were also momentarily influenced by the latter part of that communal wish. Like many, he yearned for unlimited power over others and forever. To go where he liked, to do what he liked, to beat up bullies and be brave enough to tell Mam, “I don’t like peas Mam. So don’t give 'em to me anymore… please…
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if you don’t mind…”

But then the moment of bravery and the immortal urge gave way to a child’s burst as Grandpa returned from the toilets to utter a few terrible words to mark the end of a fabulous evening of wonder and subconscious titillation for the boy, although notably such was more consciously felt by Grandpa in various mixed moments of an aged ones regrets and pleasurable memories.

Grandpa’s declaration, “It’s time to head off home lad and get you back to normality” disappointed that certain persistent unconscious adult seed desperate to grow within the boy, temporarily closing the lid on the container and returning it to the dark as he groaned inside childishly when reality callously unfolded a spirit crushing vision. Yeah right! Normality! Me blimming sister Jennifer screaming at Mam. Mam yelling at Dad. The blimming dog yipping and yapping and running in tireless circles trying to decide whose side to take. While the stupid cat will be on the window cill hissing down at them all and the chaos will feel like it’s going on forever.

The spirit of that groan stirred a slight shiver which told the few thickening hairs on his arms and a couple of new stronger ones developing on his legs to rise in rebellion and say no to being in a room with that lot forever. No! But that quickly gave way to let in the idea the only sane things in that blimming ‘ouse’ are me and the goldfish. Or so his reflex shrug suggested, which Grandpa, although slowing in steps was quick enough of mind to notice. With a certain knowing twinkle which within the glimmering lay a hope that his wife will not be too disapproving, he joyfully cast into the shades of the boy’s mood seven magical words he had saved for such a moment. “Fancy a burger and some fries, lad?”

Section Five

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The lad's disappointment instantly skittered to his feet and away but not to join the mass of collective sighs. Grandpa's words as brilliant as the boy found them they were not as wondrous or compelling as the ideas raised by the film, but with their ability to delay fate, they came a close second. But to the boy in some unseen and unconsidered way, the words were, just like the subject of the film, destined to take on their own nice rosy form of immortality. But more happily in the present, the boy's excited elongated "Yeaaah," was all that needed to be said and the sound wonderfully lightened the mood.

Turning from the screen that had mesmerised the lad and represented for them both a past that was sadly over, together, companionably, they headed into a future where with enough belief anything is possible… or so the boy's slowly reviving adult attitude suggested, but admittedly in a subconscious twitch that was packed with a yearning - Oh to be the one to find a way to activate the self-healing and regenerative qualities of starfish. Or even species of worms which inhabit our genes, or the abilities of a certain jellyfish to start life over again. Or find ways of slowing time like trees, blue whales and tortoises and turtles and so many other reptiles seem to do.

More consciously he thought, I need to discover how those creatures do it to help Grandpa live better and longer.

So, in that accidental way, the hope entwining his sigh was fully unravelled without due pomp. There was however at that precise moment one little impediment preventing his wish from taking full wing, but fortunately,
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it was a happy one and the reason was released as another silent sigh - ‘I will research all that for Grandpa, I will, but just let me have me burger first’.

The burger bar was close enough for Grandpa to walk to comfortably but as always he would insist on trying to fill his slow steps with a flow of anecdotes. But walking and talking was not an easy trick for Grandpa. The words powered by struggling lungs as they passed through his ill-fitting NHS dentures issued as breathy whistles. Only to be confused further by occasional wheezes and hay fever snuffles. Or maybe it’s his bad lungs reacting to the polluted air, the boy considered with growing concern. Where once again as he listened to Grandpa’s ageing struggles his young heart yearned to find ways to help his Grandpa regain good health.

“I remember when all this was…” Grandpa wittered, only for the rest of the sentence to be hidden in a long snuffle which kicked the boy’s concern into almost yelling Grandpa! But then the narrative picked up “...and I met your Grandma in the pub…” Only for Grandpa to change the format and sneeze before mumbling as he wiped his nose, “...where that sex shop is now, lad.”

Maybe it was the word sex which raised expectations, or his recollections of the film star’s skimpy attires but mid-babble Grandpa suddenly stood perfectly still at the kerb, heron like, as if listening for something, but not the traffic for his head did not move either left or right. He just stood staring knowingly over at the sex shop window, where his hairy, aged elongated ears, which failed so often to hear Grandma’s nags was at that moment skilfully and happily managing to catch those faintly echoes of an enjoyable past.

For a moment, no wheeze was squeezed or a snuffle sniffed as glazed eyed Grandpa listened to his youth calling out like an old friend, "Come and play again Fred. Come on…", where the ghostly calling flattened his care-

worn wrinkles in a rush to lift his weakened heart to the exhilarating peaks of a boyish beat.

Section Six

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For the lad those same long seconds perturbed his caring instincts - is Grandpa OK? Is he? Only to relax as a series of soft wheezes declared, it's alright... Grandpa's still alive! Which was highlighted further when Grandpa suddenly lightly grabbed the inquisitive boy's arm to say fervently, "Ere...," while noticeably still eyeing the provocative but tawdry window display with a gaze longing for those lost woodland walks in far off misty days with a much younger Grandma giggling at his side. Where suddenly he wished he could live as an immortal in that wood with an equally immortal and maybe nicely immoral teenage Grandma.

“...If you could ave a superpower lad what would it be?” Grandpa finally asked more softly, his voice still an echo of those woodland longings.

The inquisitive boy, Sam, or Sammy to his mates, or embarrassingly “Ah, my lovely boy,” when Mam was in a certain weird mood, for once had no need to ask questions or think. Or consult one of his many books covering some very high-brow subjects ‘considering the lads only ten’, his Dad often declared proudly to the lad’s embarrassment. There was simply no pause at all and it spilled out in a torrent of hot excited words.

“I’d wanna be immortal Grandpa and live forever and fight bad people, just like that hero did. And I wanna discover ways to help humankind.”

The last part delivered fondly at and for his Grandpa was stated with such youthful verve that Grandpa could not help but smile and pull his gaze away from the alluring window to concentrate on one of the consequences of
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those past sullies into the now ‘gone forever’ woodlands of his carefree youth.

“Do you?” Grandpa wondered, without the slighted surprise as they set off again. “But I wonder, what’s so good about being immortal? And remember, some got killed, didn’t they? So I reckon, you would only be immortal until you’re not. Pretty much like the rest of us, ay?”

“Yeah…, I didn’t get that bit, Grandpa. Surely immortal means you live forever.”

“Well I’ll be,” Grandpa chuckled. “It’s unlike you with all your book learning and questions not to spot the difference between immortal and everlasting.”

Where, as inane as his next quip was, it simply had to be given air as they crossed yet another road to head for the only lit shop in the row, which to Grandpa appeared to be as packed as a rave but fortunately not as noisy. While for the boy the light represented a longed-for arrival at his idea of heaven’s gate.

“I can tell you need a burger,” went Grandpa’s light quip, before saying more seriously as he stopped the lad near the entrance. “Being immortal is not only about the body living forever, it can also be about the mind and some even say…” Where again he paused as if caught once more by the woodland long…

Suddenly picking up the dropped thread, Grandpa suggested, “...yes…, and maybe rightly so…, the mind is even more important than the body. And consider - might a person’s deeds live on to attain immortality? And might that keep their spirit alive? You’ve heard about Jack The Ripper? And Christ, right? So, haven’t they in a manner attained immortality? And what if

immortality is just the electric in your body going on and on and what you do positively in life either charges it to keep you going. Or…" he suggested more sombrely, it's discharged to earth and your after death presence slowly dies as the power wears out."

Amused by Sam's confusion he let go of his serious mood to chuckle lightly while gently ushering the boy through the door. "Now then lad, that'll give you something to think about while we wait, won't it?"

Section Seven

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True to his handle, the inquisitive boy did exactly that... But not before ordering the feast using the bacteria-covered touchscreen. Jabbing away at the screen the bacteria's hasty retreat accidentality nudged his fingers to include two strawberry milkshakes which were not in the magic spell, but with a smile, Grandpa agreed they ought to have been, while happily handing the boy a bottle of hand sanitiser. "Use it as we can't be too sure now, can we?" Grandpa explained. "Remember, anything might kill an immortal and that idea includes you, my lad... And we can't have that now can we, because you still have lots to learn..."

Then suddenly for once without a ready smile, Grandpa bent down to peer into the lad's eyes, which altered the boy's understanding this will be important, where shrewdly as if he had read Sam's mind earlier Grandpa said, "and lots to achieve too if you really want to discover the way to true immortality."

Waiting for their number to be called the boy began earnestly thinking. And on those serious deliberations went, with of course suitable pauses for chewing and slurping where the thoughts nicely picked up again as this aged Christopher Robin and human Pooh Bear headed home.

The boy's ruminations continued throughout school, a gap year and university. They even dogged his steps as he walked as an adult through the town of his youth seeking the burger bar that had been the starting point in the race to gain firsts in biology, chemistry and then later on, philosophy and theology, as inadvertently encouraged by Grandpa on that special
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unforgettable night and one other dreadful time.

As Sam always wanted, he started his working life as a scientist seeking cures for the ills besetting humankind. While on the side and with his love for Grandpa urging him on, he quietly poked around human DNA searching for ways to trigger an ability to self-heal and renew. He worked at it all furiously for a few years and when he was not engrossed in locating humanity's holy grail, he looked at ways to save the planet and restore it and remove civilisation's dependency on harmful processes. But his efforts were either blocked by stubborn politicos or hindered by lack of funding or the results stolen by colleagues and he soon became disillusioned by the politics and criminality of it all. And then ninety-eight-year-old Grandpa let him down.

"Don't be sad for me lad. I am ready to go," Grandpa said to the close-to-tearful mid-thirties man kneeling by his bedside. Or the boy as Grandpa still thought of Sam who to his rheumy eyes needed comforting. Taking Sam's white smooth hands in his own dry blue-veined gnarly, slightly shaking ones, he said faintly, "I'm well aware of why you're so driven in your work lad and have not been to see me as often as I would have liked. I've always known your thoughts about my longevity, so let me give you my last piece of advice. But first, I'd like to remind you of something."

"Sure," Sam replied, while thinking with a smile, even now he's trying to bloody teach me…

Section Eight

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"Immortality and reality are as far apart as the human state can get, right?" Grandpa asked with a slight nod, which Sam acknowledged with a softly spoken "Yes." Only for Grandpa to snatch away that understanding. "Different yes my lad, but they are also close kin."

“What?” Sam wondered quizzically…

“Ha, I’ve confused you again” Grandpa chortled. “Remember the last time?”

Sam smirked as he answered, “Yes I do” for it was a regular one of Grandpa’s teases.

“Good…” Grandpa smiled. “Now consider this. Immortality is a lifetime for which there is seemingly no end, except we know there is an end, right? We saw it in that film… So, an immortals life is just like yours and mine. Except it’s not!”

With that declared Grandpa fell back on the pillows exhausted while Sam willed him on to rise and be his Grandpa once again as he struggled not to lose it and blubber. As if responding to the lad’s urging and with the help of Sam’s youthful arms Grandpa managed to sit up again. Clearing his throat and in an all too obvious fading voice which tried to be strong, he continued the last part of the lad’s education.

“How young eyes see the world is like immortality. Life seemingly goes
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on forever. And so it is until that day when its approaching end is noted, like immortals just before their head is cut off, or they catch an incurable virus or something. And me too, these last few years," he offered reflectively, before resting to suck in a few wheezy breaths. Patting the boy's hand to show that he was alright, Grandpa rallied to say.

"So, like I said, you're immortal until you're not. Between whatever now you inhabit and the end, you can do whatever you like because it will not kill you. I say, what you and many others seek is not immortality but an ability to recognise when that end will come, so that in-between the start and end you can really live." Grandpa offered with a smile as he ruffled the lad's hair which he noted with a fond glint, "It needs cutting lad… And yes," he continued weakly, "I'm aware of your efforts to help me. I've always known your heart and it has cheered me and kept me going for as long as I have and I thank you for it. And don't be sorry that you were not able to gift me immortality. It's not something I wanted anyway as I've come to believe that for us poor put-upon people immortality would be nothing more than a curse."

Another moment of rest followed during which the boy declared his heart to Grandpa and thanked him for his friendship, only for Grandpa to wave it off with a faint smile as he said, "Being your friend was a privilege lad…"

Uncomfortably for Grandpa Sam showed signs of blubbering then, which he had no wish to be part of. He wanted the lad's smile and inquisitive eyes to shine but not with tears. Before sadness could ruin their precious few moments together Grandpa struggled up and awkwardly leaning on his elbows delivered his last thoughts on immortality.

Section Nine

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"And just imagine an immortal being so afraid of dying that they refuse to mix with others and hide away in a cave to live out their never-ending life in fear! So my lad, immortality is not what it's cracked up to be. And to hell with living forever with creaky knees and bills and endless repeats of Coronation Street. Oh, spare me that! And how will immortals be able to judge when it's time to retire? And the way I see it, we would be controlled and forced to work right until the end of all things. And how will authorities judge the right length for a criminal's life sentence? Immortality does not grant freedom from that nonsense lad, so I say immortality is not for humans. If you do ever discover the key give it to the whales and the butterflies and bees and trees. They will know what to do with it far better than us humans. We would just make a complete mess of it all which could never be undone. Just as my death cannot be lad..."

With that, Grandpa weakly squeezed the boy's hand while mumbling from the creases of a faint smile, "Know that I'll be waiting for ya." Then with a satisfied gasp that held the knowledge he has set the boy right, he departed the world of the physical, but otherwise seemingly he hung around, in fact, he remained close to Sam throughout the rest of his life. A life that was to change course dramatically.

A few years after Grandpa's funeral and the truth of humanity's frail mortality had properly settled in Sam's mind he walked along the high street reflecting on Jack The Ripper and Christ and despots and how to make his mark on the town that now felt so oppressive and faded and pointless to his adult self. A sense that increased when he discovered that the burger bar was
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gone just like the cinema. “And in so short a time too,” he sighed before musing with a rare touch of bitterness. You were right about many in society Grandpa, they have no thoughts about immortality unless it’s to find ways to preserve things for the rich.

Saddened by the loss of those wondrous palaces he haunted in a carefree youth another of his infamous sighs issued to signal acceptance that they were simply part of a memory that will live on until he doesn’t. Or longer if there’s an everlasting which nicely knitted together his interrupted thoughts. The idea of an everlasting is the very thing he intends to discuss deeply with his future congregations once he is granted a diocese, where he hopes just like his Grandpa did for him, to inspire them to go on and do great things for the planet and humanity. Where maybe my influence will live on through them and those they help and so it will spread, just like those rippling beats from Amazonian butterfly wings which birth new winds, stir minds and hearts and there-within lies the real secret of immortality, he concluded with a smile. So thank you Grandpa for always listening and for finally setting me right.

The End