

GOODMILLENNIAL**REDEFINING THE WORD: MILLENNIAL**

Obituary for Two

It started with a phone call, as these things usually do.

I was on the patio of a bar in Columbia, Missouri with some friends, celebrating graduation and figuring out each other's plans for the future. Jason was going to grad school. Hailey was staying in town to teach at a local elementary school. My girlfriend had an extra semester of college to finish up. And I was going to go to L.A.

My plan was to be a TV writer. It seemed so easy in my head—move to LA, get a job as a Production Assistant (P.A.) and climb my way up the ladder until I was writing for a show. And why wouldn't I be hired immediately? I was educated, talented and had plenty of experience writing and performing shows locally. In my head, the only missing pieces to this jigsaw puzzle was a date for the move and a place to crash.

Mid-sentence (and also possibly mid-drink) I got a call from my mom. I stepped away from the table so I could hear her a bit better.

"Are you sitting down?" she asked me. I was actually standing at the time, so rather than confirm or deny my current posture, I asked "How come?"

"We can move you to L.A. in two weeks."

My jaw hit the ground. Apparently, a family friend had a house out there that had recently been broken into, and they wanted someone to keep their home safe due to their busy travel schedules.

"Sounds good to me," I said. "But let's chat about this later. I'm with some friends right now."

I hung up and joined my group at the table.

"What was that?" was everyone's first question.

"I found out I'm moving to L.A."

"That's awesome, dude. When do you move?"

I held up one finger and took a few gulps from my cocktail, before finally saying, "Two weeks."

There was a moment of silence. It lasted a few seconds, but it felt like forever. All my best friends, all in one place, and I now had no clue when I'd see them again. For that moment I felt how alone I was, and how alone I was going to be.

The silence that was looming over our table for what seemed to simultaneously be five seconds and also five years was ended with a loud burp from Hailey.

"Excuse me," she said.

And with that burp, I suddenly didn't feel as alone anymore.

Los Angeles, California, is basically the tramp stamp of the United States. After almost 30 hours of driving I exited off of Highland, only to be stuck in the exit lane for almost 20 minutes due to a Grateful Dead concert at the Hollywood Bowl. The streets were congested and confusing, and I think I saw a strip club or liquor store every few blocks. The glow of neon lights clung to the air, and the overdose of advertising briefly suspended my belief that I could live a fulfilling life without an iPhone.

Finally, I had arrived. I had made it. A Texas boy finally escaped the south. I came here for blood, baby.

I took the first week off to relax and enjoy the setting. I wasn't in Texas or Missouri anymore. I was in California. I was 30 minutes from the beach, 15 minutes from Hollywood Boulevard, and a safe 25 minutes from any place referenced in a Dr. Dre song. I never felt more alive in my life.

Then reality hit. It took me a solid three weeks to realize how vastly underprepared I was. All the meetings I had had prior with industry people, all the networking I had done, all of it was wasted because I didn't know anyone who could hook me up to be a P.A. I was jobless the whole month of June, and never even got a reply from all of my applications.

Two weeks before I was supposed to move out in mid-July, I went to a temp agency to try to find work. It took another two weeks for them to find me anything to do. My first job for them was stuffing goodie bags for a public speaker whose claim to fame was being an executive for a record company, only to be fired for a cocaine addiction. My second job was for a gay cruise line.

Then my move out day came, and here is where our story truly begins.

I moved into an AirBnB in Sun Valley, which is a neighborhood in L.A. The whole place looks like a combination of the wild west and nuclear disaster. Industrial structures pop out of the sandy dunes and hills in the area, and the streets are littered with losing lotto scratch-offs and crushed cans of Modelo.

The AirBnB was run by Arman, an Armenian born and raised in L.A. I remember the day I moved in being incredibly strange because there was a large man out front washing an old, beat up Mercedes from the '90s. I

assumed he was Arman, but I couldn't be sure. I approached him tepidly, with a basket of clothes in hand, and asked him, "Hey, are you Arman." The only acknowledgement he gave was one word: "Inside." I nodded and walked in. He continued washing the car.

The interior of the house looked like a drug den that had been torn apart by a dogfighting ring. The carpet was stained, disgusting, and falling apart. The walls were aged by smoke and wrinkles in the paint, and the rear screen door was torn from use. It was inside here that I met Arman for the first time.

Arman, as a character, can best be described as an idiotic sociopath motivated exclusively by saving money, retaining property value, and finding a good Armenian wife to marry him. When I first met him he had a bro-tank on, which gave me the impression that this was a man who was very proud of his biceps. He told me I had three other roommates here, and I signed a six-month lease to live there while I got my shit together.

It was hot that day, so I quickly brought the rest of my things in, unpacked, and then took a long shower. The shower was dirty and small. I was used to clean showers that were well-kept and relaxing. That shower was the moment where I felt that I had fallen from grace. All my hopes and dreams slowly started to dissipate into fear and self-loathing.

That was the first time in my life where I truly, irrevocably, felt like I had failed myself and everyone who cared about me.

The tides were turning, however. My temp agency finally got me a steady job at a local public television station, and the pay was above minimum wage. Part of my job was to attend film screenings before the movies came out in theaters, so I definitely felt like a Hollywood insider.

The seeds of my professional career had been planted, but at home trouble was brewing. I had three roommates — Yul, David, and Candace. Yul was nice enough. He was a socially awkward Asian man who was only maybe four or five years older than me. He was passionate about welding and carpentry, and Arman used his services to renovate the house for cheap. David was another quiet one. He was maybe a year older than me and wanted to be a film director. He spent most of his time in his room on an editing bay he rigged out of premium used speakers and monitors.

Finally, there was Candace.

Candace was a 63-year-old chain-smoker who hacked up tar every other sentence she spoke, and believed that she could telepathically transmit voices into people's heads. She would frequently "broadcast" to me when I was in a room with her.

She was nuts.

One time I sat with Candace on the back patio as she chain-smoked a pack of Pyramid cigarettes.

"So," she asked me inquisitively, "What did you move out here for?"

"I wanna write for television," I replied.

"Hal!" she bellowed from her fat belly. "I hope you're good at sucking cock!"

What a confusing woman.

After her less than eloquent comment, she started rambling about her life. According to her, she used to work as a private investigator, and was at one point being stalked by the CIA. She also used to illegally cross the border to Mexico so she could spend time with her lover who lived there.

I took these stories with a grain of salt, because, as I said earlier, she was nuts. Yet still, her stories, as crazy and unfounded as they were, captivated me because of how truthfully she told them. She never stirred for details, instead choosing to go in-depth on the cases she worked on. According to her, she was blackmailed by a local mayor who was having an affair.

While the validity of these testimonies were dubious at best, I was entranced by the life she envisioned for herself.

“What do you do now?” I asked her.

She took a drag from her cigarette and said “I work telemarketing.”

I found this ironic because I would frequently wake up at 7 a.m. to the sound of her screaming at her health insurance provider because they couldn’t understand her mumbling on the phone.

Then, Candace told me her age for the first time — sixty-three. I will still never forget the last two things she said to me that night.

The first was, “If you want to write my stories, you’re more than welcome to.” I had never felt more honored in my life. This stranger, whose stories were almost certainly untrue, believed in her stories enough to ask another to keep them alive for her. In that moment, I knew I wanted to write her stories.

The second was, “I like living in this house. You boys keep me young.”

Arman is easily the worst landlord to ever walk the face of the planet. You may remember earlier when I said I had three roommates. Turns out I had six. Three people were living in the garage, and I had no idea. Arman never told me.

I found these three people because I heard noises coming from the garage. I was worried someone had broken in, so I opened the door. Inside the garage was a furnished space with a bed and a desk, and three people staring at me. I had never seen anyone look so pissed before in my life.

I hastily closed the door and found Yul and asked him about what I had seen.

“Oh yeah, that’s Edmund,” he told me. “Arman probably didn’t tell you about him because he was supposed to be evicted.”

“And those other two? Who were they?”

“I don’t know. Edmund’s friends, I assume. They’re being evicted because the cops did a huge drug bust on our garage. I think they were selling from there.”

It was after this that I immediately started to lock my doors every night before I went to sleep.

For clarity’s sake, Edmund was the large man obsessed with washing his crappy Mercedes. He literally did it every single day. And when he wasn’t cleaning the Mercedes, he was stealing my shampoo and using my towel in the bathroom.

Finally, after about two months, Arman finally got them evicted. He found drug paraphernalia in their room and called the police on them. However, when the police arrived and saw the furnished garage, they asked Arman if he had a permit from the city of Los Angeles to have a converted garage. He didn’t.

Yul spent the next two weeks tearing down the room. After Arman got the permits, Yul spent another two weeks rebuilding it. Arman cut \$200 off his rent for the work.

Candace claimed that the fumes from the drugs (presumably methamphetamine) in the garage had given her dizzy spells, coughing fits and chest pain. Yul said he felt loopy from it all too, so we all carried on our lives in the hope that, with this nuisance gone, things would be better.

This story ends how it begins.

I was at work when I got the phone call. It was Arman. I stepped outside the office and answered.

“Hey man, I’m at work right now,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Hey, bro,” Arman said with his thick accent. “Did you hear about what happened at the house last night? It’s really sad.”

I told him I hadn’t. I had come home late that night from my improv class.

“Yeah, bro, Candace died,” he continued. “Heart attack.”

I said “Oh my God. I’m so sorry to hear that.” The silence hung in the air. Five seconds felt like five hours. I had slept in a house where a person died. I was going to be sleeping there again tonight.

The silence was broken by Arman.

“Yeah, so in order to honor her life, I’m having a barbecue out back tomorrow. I’m bringing the hard liquor, Yul is buying some ribs... Can you bring the beer?”

In that moment I laughed, because only Arman is insensitive and crass enough to turn a person’s death into a frat party.

The next day came quickly. I brought the beer, Yul brought the ribs, and Arman’s selfish ass didn’t even bring the liquor.

I would like to take this moment to say that I wasn’t upset that he didn’t bring liquor, but rather that he basically planned a barbecue that we didn’t want and then still didn’t bring anything he said he’d bring. We didn’t even have napkins, so I had to use my personal stash of paper towels.

During our lunch Arman held his beer up to the table.

“I propose a toast to Candace,” he said. “Now let’s try to remember Candace for all the good things she did with her life. I’ll start: Candace was always good about making rent.”

Arman saw our shocked faces. He attempted to save himself.

“Okay, most of the time she was good about making rent. But at least she was honest about it.”

It took every ounce of self-control that I had to not laugh hysterically at how crude and inconsiderate this turn of events had gotten.

Then things with Arman got even more stupid. He pulled out a non-disclosure agreement he had hastily typed on Microsoft Word. The contract stated that we would not disclose to the new tenant of Candace’s room that anyone had died in that room, and that it was to be a secret kept between Yul, David and I.

I would like to point out here that it is illegal to not disclose the death of a tenant to a new tenant in the state of California.

We all signed the paper, and then Arman went inside to keep it somewhere safe. When he returned to the back patio, he was holding a box of rubber gloves. He tossed them onto the table and then confidently said, “So, I figured since you guys are already here... Would you mind helping me bag her stuff?”

Due to both the shock value of his request, as well as how humorous it was, I happily obliged and joined Arman and Yul in raiding Candace’s room.

It was my first time stepping in there. There was dirt all over the ground, and the mattress had sunk in under the tremendous weight of Candace’s body. We took a moment to take in the scenery, and then quickly started on bagging her crap.

Never in a million years did I ever want to touch Candace’s bra. I was disgusted when I bagged the first one. I was even more disgusted when I found out she only owned three bras. I gagged internally and then persevered through the rest of the clean-up.

Then something interesting happened. We found a box of her old crap and started emptying it into the trash bags. But as I grabbed at these items, something caught my eye. It was a state-issued certificate. I picked it up and pulled it closer to my eyes so that I could see it better. There, in front of me, was a license for Candace as a legally recognized private investigator for the state of California.

A part of me considered holding onto it. It was a memento to me, and it gave me a firm realization and perspective on life I had never had before. That paper said everything I needed to know about the human condition—that beneath all the lies, the struggle, the pain and suffering, the truth always prevails. Life is full of ups and downs—but between those peaks and valleys are the stories that are worth telling. These stories are our truths, and these truths are cherished forever.

In the end, I threw away the slip of paper. I didn’t need some form of obscure symbolism to validate my experiences, or to prove anything to anyone else. There was an inherent truth in the memories she spoke, and now those truths are shared here.

What I love about this story — and yes, believe it or not, I do love this story — is that the challenges that my generation and I face on a daily basis often seem insurmountable. Amid our own personal struggles and goals, there’s always a dirty coffin filled with setbacks, ready to come to life and drag us back into the black depth of reality. Yet each setback can also be perceived as a story and an accomplishment as well.

I still haven’t given up on my dreams. In fact, I’m working twice as hard to make them a reality.

— Chase Newman

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