

# FUTURE SCAPES

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## THE GOOD LISTENER

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by Michael Marshall Smith



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WELCOME TO

# FUTURE SCAPES



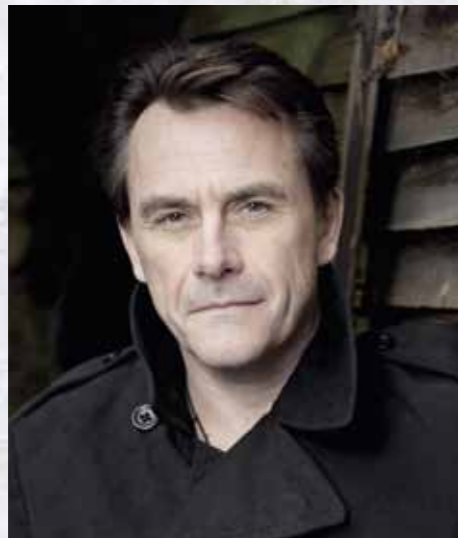
## WHAT DO YOU THINK LIFE WILL BE LIKE IN 2025?

FutureScapes is an exciting collaboration project that aims to explore the potential of technology and entertainment to create a better, more enjoyable world in 2025. It's not about predicting the future so much as imagining the possibilities. There is by definition an infinite number of possible futures ahead of us. But one thing is clear: the world of 2025 will be very different from the one we live in today.

By starting with life in 2025, rather than today, FutureScapes aims to stimulate more creative thinking about how technology might help us live sustainably. By sharing immersive and entertaining stimulus material – such as short stories – this collaboration aims to invite the contributions of 'futures' experts and an eclectic mix of thinkers, writers, designers and the public to address the opportunities and challenges of life in 2025 and the potential roles technology will play in it.

FutureScapes is designed to be as open and collaborative as possible and is being convened by leading sustainability non-profit organisation, Forum for the Future, and leading consumer technology company, Sony.

To find out more or to get involved visit [www.sony.co.uk/futurescapes](http://www.sony.co.uk/futurescapes) or follow us on Twitter @better\_futures and #futurescapes.



Michael Marshall Smith was born in England but spent his early years in the United States, South Africa and Australia. He read Philosophy and Social and Political Science at King's College, Cambridge, before publishing his first novel in 1994.

His critically acclaimed novels have won a string of awards and his breakout blockbuster, *The Straw Men*, was a Sunday Times bestseller, consequently becoming an internationally bestselling sensation. Marshall has also worked extensively as a screenwriter, writing for clients in both LA and London. He lives in London, with his wife and son.

# THE GOOD LISTENER

by Michael Marshall Smith

I got into Santa Cruz just after noon, a three-hour cruise up from Big Sur. My mood was murky and I found Santa Cruz's road system difficult to parse once I got off the highway, so I asked the rental car to negotiate the last few miles by itself. The nav was so accustomed to me feeding it very specific route instructions – gleaned from the itinerary, reconstructed from location services data off my father's phone – that it asked if I was sure about this. I said I was, and it told me that it would guide me to the Dream Inn by the most efficient means it could determine. I said that would be fine. In the meantime it spooled my notes up onto the windshield because that's what I'd asked for every day so far at this point. I knew what they held for this evening and so I just turned the wheel and pressed the gas and tapped the brake and watched out the window as the car piloted me smoothly toward the ocean, the last stop on my journey, and its one very small mystery.

I remember the first truly adult thing my father said to me. I would have been around fifteen and we were on the deck after an evening meal at home. I asked him why he didn't say much at such events – except, because I was fifteen, what I actually said was along the lines of why was he so quiet and why didn't he join in the conversation like other people's more fun and engaged dads but instead just sit there looking like he was thinking about something else the whole damned time. He was leaning against the rail smoking a cigarette and looking out into the woods and after a moment he turned and looked at me, coolly, but with something I later came to understand was a measured and long-game kind of love. He said:

"There came a point when you and your sister had started talking and I realised that with the two of you and your mom there was just never going to be that much dead air in the family, and I could either fight to get every damned sentence out . . . or not."

I don't remember my reply. I'm sure it was smart and would have earned a high five from my school buddies for getting off a good one against the older generation, but I doubt it was thoughtful or very polite. This would have been around late 2011, early 2012.

Six years later my parents split after my mom hooked up with a colleague. In 2020 the divorce went through. I remember my mom making a joke at the party that evening – her arm around said colleague – about how finally she'd got twenty-twenty vision of reality back. I didn't really laugh. By then I was at college and had started to dimly appreciate that the world was a little more complicated than I'd thought. It just also seemed mean-spirited.

On 14 November of 2025, my dad was killed in a car accident.

The Dream Inn stands on a cliff above Cowell Beach, somewhere you'll have heard of if you're a surfer. It and Steamer Lane just along the way are meccas for those who are into the sport, which does not include me. The hotel stands upon the cliff and hangs over it, in fact: a draping 1960s-styled structure regooded into boutique hotel status twenty years ago, and still doing well.

I put my car in the lot opposite – there was no entry for valet parking on my dad's bill for his stay, so I assumed that was what he had done too – and carried my bag across the road. I checked into the room next to the one he'd had, for three nights. I put the suitcase on the bed and went out onto the balcony to look at the sea. It was sunny and clear, and I could see all the way across the bay to Monterey. From the eighth floor all you could hear was the sound of waves and barking of sea lions.

I took my dad's phone out of my pocket and held it in my hand. It had been in my possession for five months, from the day when we all visited his place in the week after his death. As we stood in his little apartment wondering what we were supposed to be feeling and how on earth to articulate it, I noticed the phone on the table by the window. It was part of the collection of belongings that had been salvaged from his car after the wreck and it caught my eye because it was the same one he'd had the first time I'd come to visit him in the city, after the divorce became final. He'd moved back to New York three months before and we'd gone walking around Greenwich Village and then sat drinking coffees outside some place he'd evidently become familiar with.

He took me by surprise in two ways. First, by talking. It wasn't like he said so much, but he said something. I'd undertaken the trip out of a feeling of duty and because the party my mom had held made me feel uncomfortable. I had not expected much of it. I certainly hadn't expected him to sit asking me questions and apparently engaging with the answers. I was also struck by the fact the phone he'd put on the table was brand spanking new, in fact the same model that I had myself.

I commented on this.

"Well, yeah," he said, looking sheepish. "I don't have communication on tap like I did in the old days. Have to make a little more effort myself."

After that the conversation dried up and it felt more like business as usual.

The phone on the table by the window in his apartment was the same one, looking a little battered and bordering on retro, what with being five years old. I slipped it in my pocket without asking my mom or sister if that was okay. I figured they wouldn't care.

I'm sure I was right.

I spent the first day in Santa Cruz following the itinerary as closely as possible, as I had throughout the trip. I went to the two coffee shops he'd stopped at and also the restaurant where he'd taken lunch. I matched the times as best I could, though I ate and drank what I wanted. The second-hand bookstore he'd visited was closed for the day. I couldn't be sure exactly what period he'd spent there, but I walked away a couple of minutes after four, the time at which his accounts logged that he'd paid \$26.14 (including tax) for a book on local history.

Early evening I ate a burger in a place called Betty's on Pacific, the main drag. Again I ate what I wanted, which is what he would have done. Then I went back to the hotel. It was still early but it appeared he'd done that too, according to a Speke logged at 9.34 which told the world – or the portion of it listening on that network – that he was about to turn in. Tired, I guess. He'd been nearly thirty years older than me, of course.

I don't know how it went for him, but it took me a while to get to sleep. Tomorrow was the last-but-one day of the trip, and also the big one.

Not the last day, but the day with the hole.

I gradually started to visit him more often in NYC. On one of these trips about a year and a half ago he mentioned how he'd always wanted to make the drive up from LA to San Francisco up the Pacific Coast Highway, and now he was going to go ahead and do it. I asked him whether most people didn't make the journey the other way, heading south. Aha, he said, but if you drove north then the driver got the best view of the sea all the way. Of course if you shared the driving you'd have to share that too, but there'd be other advantages.

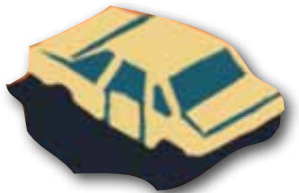
It was too subtle for me. I didn't get it.

By the time I got that he'd been issuing a low-key invitation, he was already dead. I was real busy at work and even if I'd realised, I would have said I didn't have the time. Things were sufficiently affable enough between us by then that I would have gone ahead and made the mistake of thinking it'd be no big deal if I didn't go. I would have assumed there would be some other time.

My dad's phone lay in a drawer in my house for five months after he died. Then one night, for some reason, it occurred to me to take it out. I guess I was missing him or something, maybe regretting all the silences there had been now that there was no way of filling them.

As I held the phone in my hands a thought occurred to me. I dug in another of my drawers and sure enough, found the charger I'd had for the same phone. The stores may be full of new tech but there's an awful lot of the old stuff.

14:22



\$26.14



Still knocking around in people's homes. I slotted it in the wall and plugged the other end in the phone, savoring the old-school vibe of having to connect power to a device by wires rather than leaving it on an inductance pad. Seconds later the screen blinked into life. It even had reception – cancelling his contract had evidently been missed in the post-death tidy-up.

I pressed the virtual home button. It pinged and the OS started bleating about the million software updates that had happened in the intervening months. I paused them all, not wanting to change the state of the phone as it had been on the day he died.

I had a look around it. I was surprised. There were a lot of apps on the phone, and not just what I would have expected. Sure there were productivity apps and business reference material and travel guides, but also Twitter and Speke and BinThere and TellMeStuff and TripBuddies and even GodPOV. For a guy I remembered as extremely challenged in the communicating department, he sure had a lot of hooks into the outside world. I tried kicking up Speke – my own social network of choice – but hit a login screen. After so long dead, the phone needed everything to be logged into again.

Feeling sad, and like this was symbolic of something or other, I put the phone down. But then picked it up again, and after a few minutes found what I was looking for: his password database app. I assumed I'd be screwed there too, that he'd have used eyecog or a voice gesture like any normal person, but when I ran my thumb over the virtual keyboard a dialogue swivelled into view saying I'd got the password wrong. This came close enough to implying he'd used a typed sequence of letters and/or numbers that I spent the next two hours – with the help of a few beers – trying to work it out.

I got there in the end: [HelenaNoelleScott](#).

The names of his children and his ex-wife, run together. Had he chosen this password before the divorce or afterwards? I didn't know. It didn't matter.

It was still hard to think about.

I spent the morning and afternoon of my second day in Santa Cruz walking. There was a breakfast check-in at the Ideal Grille, a quickie lunch at the Spuddy's concession on the Boardwalk, and a transaction at the Starbucks up on West Cliff. The last had just closed down and been turned into a student-oriented lentil-and-chai outfit, but I stuck it out. There was an ATM outside, as I'd known there would be. I got some money from it.

I dawdled on the way back to the hotel, trying to ensure I got back at around the same time I believed him to have done. I was a few minutes early – getting to the room at 4.56, ten minutes before he'd rung down for a room-service pot of tea, as logged on his online receipt – but close enough.

I took a shower, changed my clothes (Dad had always been a stickler for marking a difference between the day and evening in exactly these ways), and then sat at the end of the bed.

A few minutes later it was 5.27.

And I was in the hole.

Once I'd gained entry to the password database I unlocked everything. And I was stunned. On Speke, he'd had over six hundred followers, and had been following around the same number. Not movie-star level, of course. Far less than some mouthy blogger. But for an unsociable guy in his late fifties, still pretty solid.

Even more surprising to me were the check-in apps. He'd logged everything in the last few years. Each time he went to a cafe, restaurant, bar or store, there it was. Then the travel apps – hotels, flights, even car rentals, all logged and rated. I'd drunk enough beer by this point that I was open to the maudlin, and it struck me maybe he'd done this because he didn't have a wife to share with anymore. Maybe, maybe not. Maybe he actually liked using all this social stuff. Maybe it was a game.

Maybe he'd just been really bored.

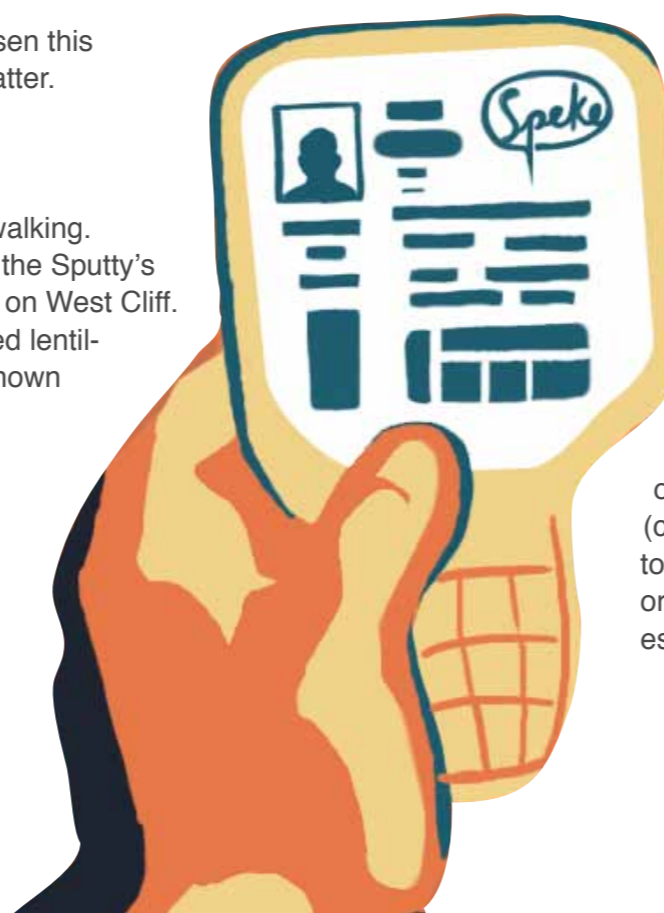
Either way, that's when I got the idea. I tapped my own phone to wake the TVPC. My friends think I'm a throwback for sleeping the thing when I'm not using it but if you have the occasional tendency to talk to yourself when you're alone, the ever-listening ear of voicecog can lead to unexpected and unhelpful results. I told the TV to expect a list, and then read out all my dad's sites, their login passwords, gave it the dates, and asked it to triangulate with all available APIs.

Forty seconds later a rough outline appeared on the screen. I finally allowed my dad's phone to download all the software updates it had stacked, and then got the TV to mix in the results from onboard location services together with cached records from his bank accounts.

In five minutes I had it, chapter and verse.

A week later I flew into LA.

The itinerary, as I took to calling it, was the summation of everything my father's phone and web services had to tell me about his trip up the Pacific Coast Highway. The web is very, very good at this stuff now. If you let it hook into the outlets of all the sites you belong to, all the status updates and logins you've made (consciously or otherwise), every time you've waved your phone over an NFT terminal to pay for goods or services, every time you've asked a question of a net-linked satnav or a sponsored street-corner AskMe post, and every time your phone sends up a blip to establish the nearest mast . . . it knows a lot. It listens to everything that we say and do





and it remembers it all. The past doesn't fall away like it used to, disappearing behind as you keep moving forward. Experience is saved. Recalled. Somewhere in the cloud is everything you've done. If you want, you can get it back.

I couldn't get him back, of course. But now I had the itinerary. I should have gone with him. I decided to do the best I could, five months too late.

The hole is a period of fourteen hours. It stretches from early evening on the second-last day of his trip until 9.26 the following morning, when he bought (and rated, highly) a coffee at an indie store downtown. It's not such a big or inexplicable hole. He was staying in the Dream Inn, of course – I wasn't suspecting he'd suddenly gone to the moon and back. There was no record of an evening meal, however, which was unique in the entire trip and thus mildly intriguing. No record of anything being bought or done during that entire period, in fact, though there'd been an ATM withdrawal of a hundred dollars in the afternoon (which was why I'd done the same). There was no way of filling in the missing time. I'd even had the software re-triangulate again, in the hope it'd missed something before, but nothing came.

It was blank. Dead air.

I needed to fill it somehow. I'd been hoping an idea would come to me, a particular way of spending the evening that might seem an appropriate means of honouring him. It did not. I wasn't feeling in an inspired mood. Tomorrow would be the last day of my trip. Of his trip. The day after that he'd left the hotel just before eleven and drove through town (buying \$152.50-worth of gas and some bottled water on the outskirts) before heading onto Highway 17 to start the journey to San Francisco airport. At 13.47 a poorly maintained truck lost its load across both lanes, resulting in the random and pointless death of my dad and five other road-users. His death was logged at 14.22.

Superstitiously, perhaps, I was intending to drive to the airport via another route. I wanted to replicate the trip, but I'm not a total nutcase.

I sat in the room for an hour, getting bored and sad. Then I realised this was dumb and stood up.

I left the hotel intending to simply go for a walk. My dad liked walking a lot. That could well have been what he did that night – missing out on his supper by accident and figuring he could stand it for once, before winding up back in the room and munching on the free cookies they provided before going to bed early again. Travelling by yourself can be interesting and is good for the soul, but there comes a point where you've read as much as you can read for one day. None of the e-readers on his phone showed a log of being used that evening.

As I stood outside the hotel I remembered it had a bar, and decided I'd go for a beer first. This turned out not to be in the main building, which was how I'd missed it so far, but in a meeting facility attached to it by a corridor. When I walked in I wished I'd come the night before, whether it was on the itinerary or not. It was quiet and calm and empty, with dimly lit tables in front of huge plate glass windows giving a great view onto the wharf and the ocean.

I sat up at the bar, for the moment deserted. A few minutes later a woman came from out back. She was in her late forties, I'd guess, blonde hair pulled back in a pony-tail. She looked like she ran, or hiked.

When she saw me she frowned, and seemed to hesitate, before coming over. I ordered a beer and turned to look out over the sea.

As sometimes happens, the first beer made me decide a second would be a good idea. The bar had started to fill up in the meantime, people in suits, and I had to wait a while because the woman seemed to be running the place single-handedly. As she eventually pulled my Sierra Nevada I caught her looking at me again.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

She smiled hurriedly, shook her head. Then evidently decided to say what was on her mind. "You look familiar," she said. "Been here before?"

I shook my head. "My dad came here once though. About five months ago. We look alike."

"What was his name?"

"Rick Motz."

Her reaction to this was hard to interpret. She went down the other end to serve another customer.

Half an hour later I ordered another. In the meantime I'd watched the sun go down over the bay, eaten a lot of peanuts, and come up with another question I wanted to ask.

As she handed me my drink I asked it. "So – did you and my dad talk at all?"

"Sure."

"Just a few words, or . . . ?"





"Oh, more than that. It was a really quiet night. Most of the evening he was the only person in here." She shrugged, as if it was all no big deal. It was not completely convincing.

"He died," I said. It was clumsy and graceless, but I didn't know how else to say it.

She looked shocked. I told her how it had happened. "That's terrible," she said. She said it in a way that seemed sincere.

I drank a mouthful to let the moment dissipate. "So, you guys chatted?"

"Quite a bit."

"What about?"

"I don't remember. Something, I guess. You know how that goes. He made me laugh. A lot."

"He *did*?"

"For sure. He was funny. He was a good listener, too."

She left to deal with a new party of raucous business people, fresh out of a brainstorming session. I drank my beer slowly and looked out through the window at the remaining hints of the view of the beach.

I thought about my dad and wondered whether all the time I'd been growing up he hadn't been not-speaking. I wondered if he'd been listening instead.

I ordered and drank one more beer, and was about to autopay by TABapp when I realised that was wrong. I got out my wallet and paid with some of the cash from the ATM instead. As, I was now guessing, he had done.

As I got up to leave the waitress came over. She was carrying a tray of dirty glasses and she looked tired, but nonetheless she came the length of the bar to say goodbye.

"I'm real sorry to hear about your dad," she said.

I nodded, not knowing what to say, and feeling – for the first time on the entire trip – completely empty, and as if I wanted to cry. "Thank you."

"You miss him?"

I nodded, and she nodded too.

She looked out of the window, into the blackness over the ocean. "He was a nice man," she said.

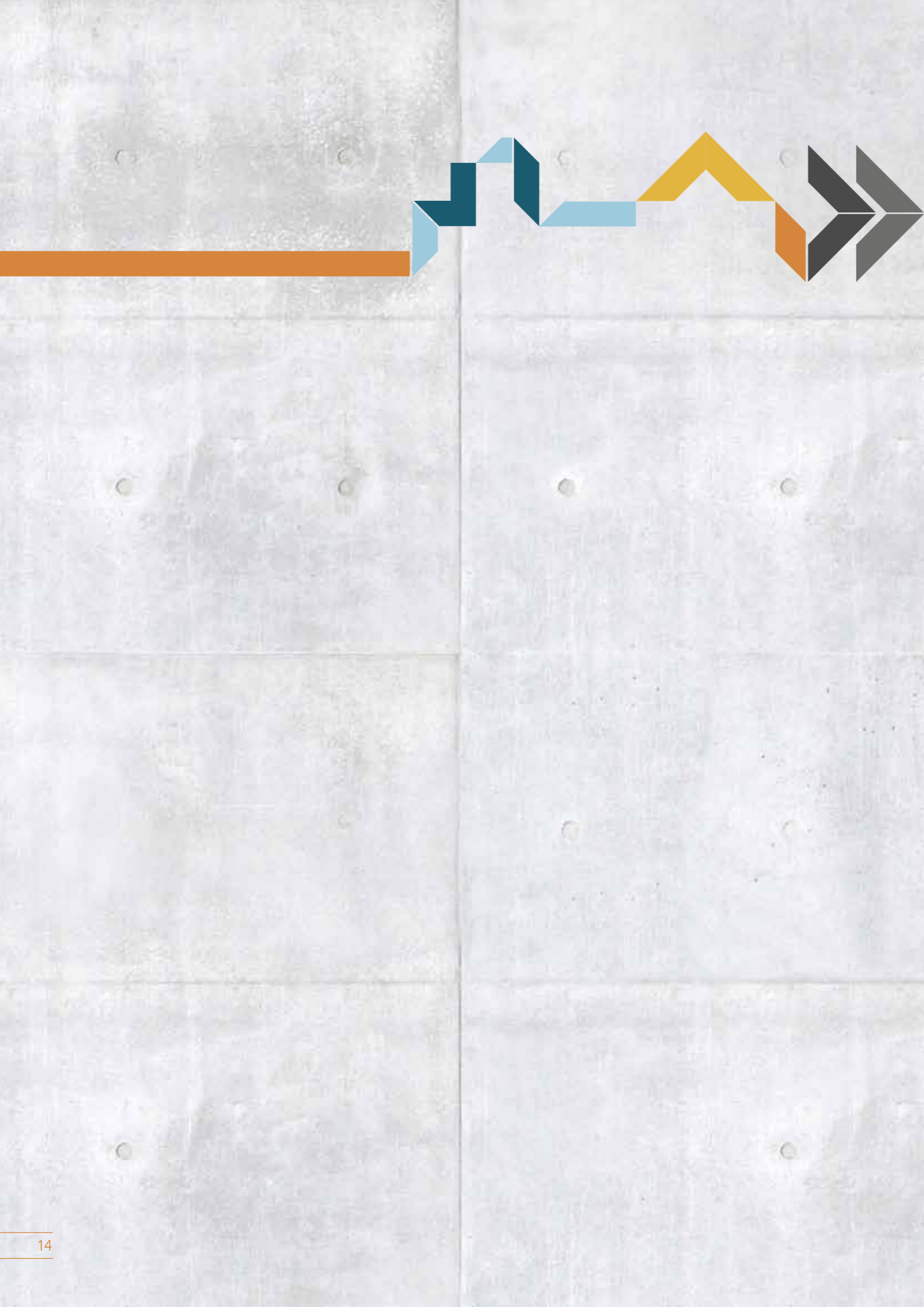
Next day I followed the itinerary. Coffee shops, another bookstore, this and that. The day after I went home, driving up to SFO via the coast road rather than taking Highway 17 inland. I made it back in one piece.

I'm glad I was able to trace the trip I didn't take. I'm glad he went on the journey he'd always wanted, I'm glad he stayed at the Dream Inn, and I'm glad he decided to head down to the bar. I still don't know for sure where my father spent the missing night – maybe in his hotel room, maybe not – though I suspect I know how.

I'm happy for the hole to remain. I no longer feel the need to fill it. There have always been silences in the world, and that's the way it should be.

There should be gaps. Sometimes it's in those moments of silence, of dead air, that the meaningful things happen. It's good we have things listening to all our stories now, keeping track of everything we have been and done: it's even better if, like the best listeners, they turn a deaf ear from time to time.





## About Sony

Sony is a leading global innovator of audio, video, communications and information technology products for both the consumer and professional markets. Offering a complete end-to-end HD value chain and with its electronics, music, pictures, game and online businesses, Sony is one of the world's leading digital entertainment brands, employing approximately 170,000 people worldwide.

Sony recognise that our businesses have a direct and indirect impact on the societies in which we operate and we see sustainability as a critical part of our company ethos and activities. Our partnerships with NGOs such as WWF, UNICEF and Save the Children ensure we play our part as a responsible global company. Our "Road to Zero" global environmental plan sets out a long-term goal of achieving a zero environmental footprint (through curbing climate change, resource conservation, control of chemical substances and biodiversity) throughout the life cycle of our products and business activities by 2050, as well as specific mid-term targets in line with that goal.

Sony believes that technology can make a positive contribution to tackling social and environmental issues, both today and in 2025. We have a strong track record in open innovation for sustainability with our Forest Guard and Open Planet Ideas initiatives.

Sony's role in FutureScapes is to use our brand's reach and our expertise in technology, imagination and innovation to engage the widest possible audience in an open collaboration to help everyone better understand – and innovate for – an uncertain future.

To find out more about our corporate sustainability activities, visit: [www.sony.co.uk/eco](http://www.sony.co.uk/eco)

## About Forum for the Future

Forum for the Future is a non-profit organisation working globally with business and government to create a sustainable future. We have 15 years experience inspiring new thinking, building creative partnerships and developing practical innovations to change our world. Our aim is to transform the critical systems that we all depend on, such as food, energy and finance, to make them fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

Forum works with more than 100 partners across business and the public sector. We specialise in a 'system innovation' approach to sustainability and use powerful tools such as 'futures', innovation and sustainable business model development to help companies succeed. We communicate and share our thinking and tools widely, including running a Masters course for future leaders and publishing the leading magazine on environmental solutions and sustainable futures, Green Futures.

Forum for the Future's role in FutureScapes is to design and deliver the futures process and provide sustainability expertise.

[www.forumforthefuture.org](http://www.forumforthefuture.org)

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