

# Futures

## A thousand words, unspoken

Memories are made of this. **By Wendy Nickel**

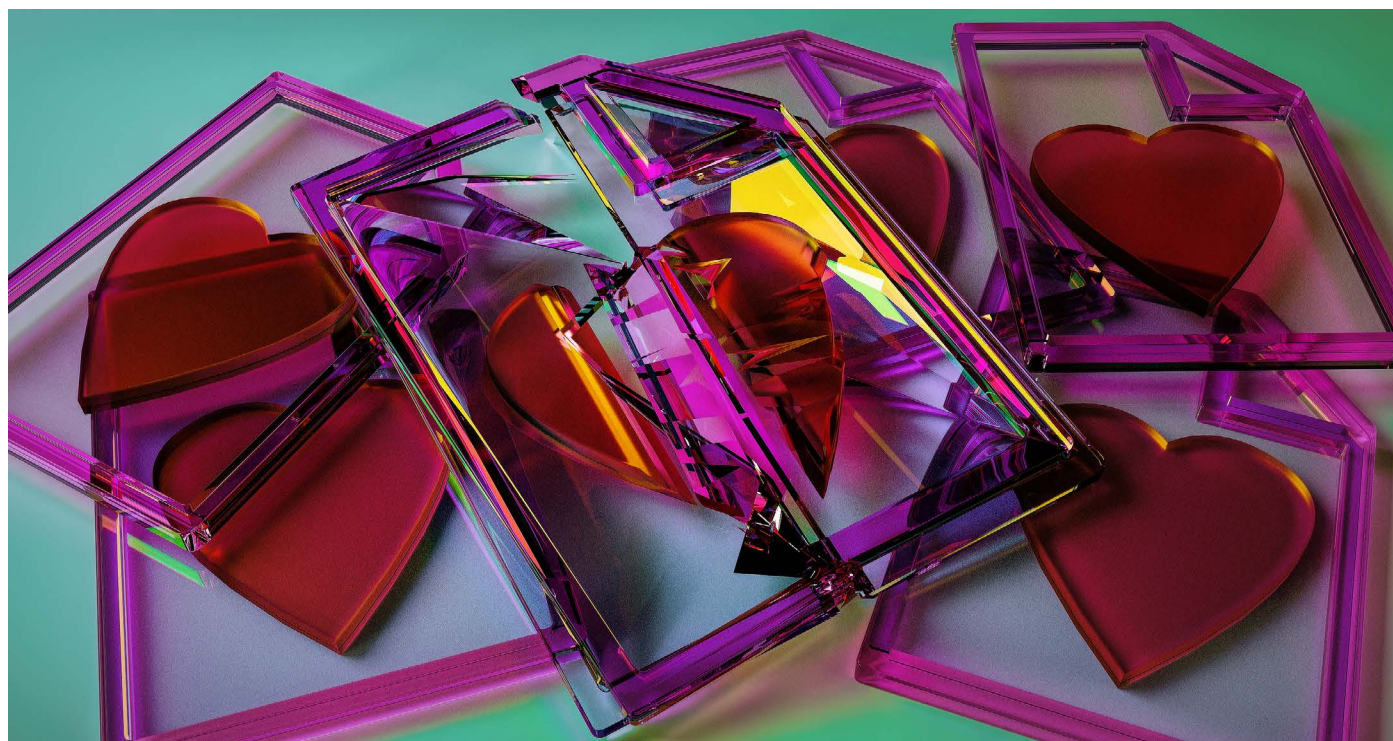


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**W**hen it comes to preserving the cherished memories of the vacation where he'll propose to his girlfriend, Ryan Burkeman doesn't play cheap.

Somewhere in the lines of the itemized receipt from his travel agent – signed off on by the happy couple – is the cost of an extra air-line ticket: first class, dinner included. An extra hotel room, directly across the hall from their suite. One extra all-exclusive, all-expenses-paid pass for every attraction on their itinerary. The vague line item: "Photography."

Everything is set up, ready to go, planned with professional precision. Their family and friends have been notified and are poised to like and share and retweet and comment on every event in turn. They're all eager to be a part of the journey, from 1,000 miles away.

*On our way!* says the caption on a shot of the modern-chic couple, striding like movie stars through the terminal. The image is sharp, their figures perfectly framed; it looks like a page from a magazine. The photo stream is nearly instantaneous so their friends can

experience the whole thing with them, yet for the happy couple, their trip is blissfully distraction-free.

"We share your lives," as the slogan says, "so you can focus on living them."

*First class – the only way to fly!* declares another image as Ryan clinks his glass against Natalya's.

*New York, at last!* announces a photo of the two emerging from the airport, arms raised to hail a yellow cab.

None of their friends see the shot that follows, of Ryan yelling at the cab driver when traffic on 34th Street lumbers to a standstill. His face is red and agitated as he leans between the seats. (DISCARD)

*Breakfast at Tiffany's!* The next morning, the first photo is croissants and fruit jam, arranged like artwork on the plate.

*Central Park!* They walk hand in hand through bridges and tunnels – just the two of them, alone in the crowd.

*Statue of Liberty!*

*Times Square!*

Yet there are more images throughout those

days that don't make the cut. That don't get uploaded to the feed:

Natalya gazing intently into her coffee as Ryan leans over to watch a waitress walk by. (DISCARD)

Ryan scowling at a crowd of schoolchildren on the ferry. (DISCARD)

A close-up of Ryan's hand, so tight around Natalya's arm that it causes a band of whiteness on the skin beneath each finger. (DISCARD)

*Broadway, baby!* The couple, dressed up in glitz and glamour and heels, with the shining lights illuminating their faces as they approach the ticket counter.

A late-night image of the hotel hallway, with light glaring through the crack in the bottom of the door. It's slightly tilted, as if taken hastily, distracted, one-handed. (DISCARD)

A pale-faced hotel employee, timidly knocking at that same door. The photo doesn't show his concerned whisper or Ryan's heated response, but you can see Natalya's figure, fuzzy in the background, still wearing her gown, her hands covering her face. (DISCARD)

*Pondering beauty.* Natalya, before a Monet

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with a look on her face that might be taken as quiet meditation.

A closer version of that same image. One in which the meditation now takes on an air of uncertainty. Misgivings. (DISCARD)

*It's nearly time!* The couple stand at the base of the Empire State Building, staring upwards, Ryan's arm locked around Natalya's waist.

*Looking out into the future.* The couple, on the 86th-floor observatory, gazing out over the bustling city.

*It's time!* Ryan down on one knee, the whole city a backdrop behind him.

*Surprise!* Natalya's face, shocked and smiling and crying all at once as Ryan holds out a small, black box. The sun reflects off the diamond. A brilliant image, worth every penny.

(But at what cost?)

A frown creasing Ryan's face into angry wrinkles as Natalya reaches into her pocket to retrieve her ringing phone. (DISCARD)

There's no photo to show his angry words or her insistence on answering. After all, she'd told everyone not to phone unless it was an

absolute emergency. There's no image to show the muttered words she hears on the phone line, telling her to check the photos in the cloud.

Natalya, staring at her phone, her smile evaporated. (DISCARD)

Ryan, standing now, still holding out the ring with an expression more threat than invitation. (DISCARD)

Natalya, frowning at the phone, her thumb flipping through the images that weren't deleted at all, but instead were merely uploaded to a private 'DISCARD' folder in the cloud. Her expression a mixture of resigned sorrow and determination. (DISCARD)

The back of Natalya's head, disappearing in the crowd as she leaves him. (DISCARD)

Ryan, in a pique of anger, throwing the box, ring and all, through the metal grates and out across Fifth Avenue. It hovers in the air, thousands of dollars frozen in time in a picture worth thousands of words. (DISCARD)

A final image: Ryan, looking around, as if dismayed. As if wondering what went wrong.

His eyes look directly at the camera (has he figured it out?), but they're unfocused, unseeing, oblivious. (DISCARD)

For all that he's paid for my services, I'm just a line on the receipt. A cheque to be cut. A face in the crowd, operating a camera drone intentionally designed to be unobtrusive – practically invisible – so as not to spoil the façade he shows the world. He didn't see the extra tips I gave the cabbie or the waitress, using his expense card. He didn't see me ring the front desk that late, loud night.

I pluck the tiny, fly-sized drone from the air, slip the controller into my pocket, and turn away, confident that even now, I'm beneath his notice. He doesn't see me at all.

**Wendy Nikel** is a speculative-fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. For more info, visit [wendynikel.com](http://wendynikel.com).

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Wendy Nikel reveals the inspiration behind *A thousand words, unspoken*.

"A picture is worth a thousand words."

I love photography. I love taking pictures, be it on my digital SLR or on my handy cell-phone camera. I love looking through old photographs and seeing what life was like 'back in the day'. I love looking at my friends' and family's photos, too, to get that small glimpse into life's memorable moments: birthdays, weddings, holidays, vacations. I find it fascinating how photographs shape our memories of these experiences, helping us recall specific details while the rest of the recollection fades.

I've had the seed for this story in the back of my head for quite some time. Somewhere in my piles of notebooks where I brainstorm my ideas, I'd written the phrase 'vacation photographer'. In my head, it was a bit like a wedding or event photographer, except instead of a gig that lasts only a few hours, folks could hire a photographer to tag along on their vacations to skilfully capture the excitement of each new experience for posterity. Of course, they'd need to stay in the background, not intruding on the vacationers' relaxation, which is where the near-future technology in my story comes into play.

But as the characters in this piece discover, in today's world of instant uploads and social-media influencers, the photographs we share with the world don't always tell the full story, while the ones we keep to ourselves may show more than we'd like others to know.

