

**HE'S GOT MAIL**

Business student Matt Sly wrote the software for FutureMe.org, which has attracted upward of 1 million visitors.

# DEAR ME

To: **Self**

Cc:

Subject: **What if**

**you could send yourself an e-mail  
scheduled for delivery 50 years from now?**

**-J.R. Moehringer**



### Wish You Were Here

**Dear FutureMe,**

It's been four years since university. You don't know where J may be lurking -- she says she will burn the house down if you don't move away from your parents, and Joanne's does good on her promises, so, yeah... maybe it's time to start packing.

written: 2006-03-24

sending: 2010-06-10

**Dear FutureMe,**

Well, you've made it a full year hopefully without a drink. Imagine what your life would have been like by now if you hadn't quit. I'd say go out and have a drink on me, but why don't you just kiss your wife and be thankful for what you have.

Love you bud,

Mark

written: 2006-07-27

sending: 2007-06-04

### Dear FutureMe,

On this day you vandalized a car with Anthony. You spent the night in jail and got bonded out the next day for \$1,000. Your trial was on Aug 28th. Hopefully you didn't get that felony and hopefully your still friends with Anthony or maybe more.

Your a SENIOR!!! whoo hoo!!!! Its great cuz theres no doubt in your mind that your gonna graduate. You've thought about dropping out but not seriously. Your reasons are cuz you don't want to get out of bed thats why. It has nothing to do with grades or peers or anything serious. You haven't decided if you want to go to college or not. People keep asking you if your gonna go or what you want to be. You dont know nor have the money. You either want to be a chef or own a pet shop from the opinion of your friends. After watching Hells Kitchen your not sure you want that kind of pressure. Your not good at math or being a leader so your not sure if you can run a business. Hey! Maybe you could be a breeder and let your spouse be the money maker.

But you'll keep thinking "what if?" jus try a junior college or something. It wouldnt hurt. your deff gonna need a job. But where? You could always work with Buckwheat

**Like many young people**, Matt Sly and Jay Patrikios spent a fair amount of time thinking about the future. Then one day they were thinking about the past, playing Trivial Pursuit with a group of friends, and they thought: Wouldn't it be cool if your Past Self could communicate with your Future Self—via e-mail?

How lame, their friends said, laughing.

But Sly and Patrikios knew the idea was ingenious.

And they soon set about making it real.

Sly, a 30-year-old Oakland native who studies business at the Yale School of Management, wrote the software. Patrikios, a 32-year-old New Yorker who now works for Amazon, helped name and design the website, FutureMe.org. Together they defined their website's one simple, if slightly sci-fi, mission: to receive self-addressed e-mails and store them for delivery on whatever far-off date the e-mailer chooses.

Now, four years after its launch, FutureMe.org has become a quiet phenomenon, receiving nearly 400,000 e-mails, millions of hits and worldwide media attention. (Sly and Patrikios also suspect their idea inspired creative thievery by the makers of "The Lake House," starring Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock, but that may just be normal entrepreneurial paranoia.)

Sad, funny, scary, shocking, the e-mails posted on FutureMe.org are so compelling, so human, that Sly and Patrikios recently got the idea to collect the best of them in a book, "Dear Future Me," to be released by HOW Books this fall.

"Some of the e-mails made us laugh out loud," Sly and Patrikios write in their introduction, "some had us pretty scared, and some of them had us putting our hands up to our faces, peeking through our fingers and hoping that the people who wrote them would turn out okay."

For instance, there is the Alzheimer's patient who e-mails his Future Self regularly in order to maintain some sense of continuity. And there are the e-mailers who send themselves suicide notes. (It's unclear just how they intend to read them.)

Sly says the most moving and memorable e-mails are written by U.S. soldiers in Iraq. One begs his Future Self to survive: "Please live long enough to read this email." Another tries to record how it feels to be safe, addressing his Present Self and Future Self in the same breath: "You are home on leave with the woman of your dreams. Make love to her often, take her shopping, laugh, enjoy her company. In a few days you will have to go back to that [expletive] hole Iraq and it will be another 3 months before you can hold her again. Savor every second with her."

Most of the great philosophers have struggled to define this elusive thing called Self. Plato, Descartes, Locke, Hume, they



**READ IN ONE SITTING,  
AS A SINGLE WORK OF  
IMPROVISATIONAL REPORTAGE,  
THE E-MAILS GIVE A RARE  
GLIMPSE INTO THE COLLECTIVE  
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WONDERS IF THE WORLD  
IS AT PEACE. ANOTHER  
WONDERS IF IT EXISTS AT ALL.**

For more letters from the upcoming book, go to [www.latimes.com/futureme](http://www.latimes.com/futureme)

all gave slightly different answers to the same haunting question: Who am I?

FutureMe.org freshens this age-old question by reframing it in e-mail-ese, the telegraphic code of our daily lives, which creates a sharper sense of immediacy than the prosaic letter. Forced to address ourselves through the language and lens of a new technology, one that stretches and shortens our notion of time, we can't help but ask: Is this me at 42 the same me I will be at 62? Am I just one me in the midst of a single unified narrative, or a series of mes connected by one strand of memories, one starting point, one name?

Above all, in 30 years, or 50 years, who will be the "you" in the ubiquitous declaration: "You've got mail"?

Sly and Patrikios decided to charge nothing for the use of their time-transcending e-mail server. Sly says he's always believed the Internet was meant to be free and a force for good. Besides, he adds, "we're not saving children here."

**THE COMMUNICATORS: Jay Patrikios, left, and Matt Sly collected the best of the e-mails in a book, "Dear Future Me," to be published this fall.**



And yet the website may save some people from depression, loneliness or worse. Many e-mails reveal a soul on the brink, and it's only the unblinking hindsight of that Future Me holding back catastrophe.

"These letters stay with me," Patrikios says.

Though nearly all the e-mailers have a uniform disregard for the niceties of spelling, punctuation, capitalization and grammar, they vary widely in tone. Some send virtual love letters to their Future Selves. Others send hate mail. ("Okay, let me start this letter off with this: YOU SUCK.") Some flatter their Future Selves as sage elders. Others plead with their Future Selves as if they are hanging judges—which makes some sense. Since Future Me must cope with the aftermath of Present Me's diet, addictions and dental negligence, Future Me figures to be Past Me's toughest critic. "Forgive me for everything I've done wrong," one e-mailer writes. "I was weak."

Many barrage their Future Selves with questions, undaunted by the fact that Future Me won't be able to answer the questioner directly: "are you going to be married to an italian chef? did you get up the courage to ask that old high school friend out? Are you an aunty? did you finally get your masters? are you making mucho money doing private practice? did you get burnt out? do you still listen to Marc Broussard? Are you still scared to drive in the stupid snow? did you ever learn to play more than three chords? Do you still think that being 26 years old is old??"

Others send themselves advice—or gifts: "you are probably hungry and poor. So go look in your dictionary next to the word 'hungry.' You'll find a \$5 stashed there. Go buy a happy meal at McDonalds."

**There are a few simple ground rules** on the website. E-mails can be public or private—it's up to the e-mailer. (Thousands visit the site daily to browse the public e-mails, and in the wake of media attention the number of visitors has briefly exceeded 1 million.) Also, Sly and Patrikios opted to set limits on the delivery time frame. The maximum is 50 years; the minimum is one month. "We didn't want to become a reminder service," Sly says. "Dear Future Me: Pick up your laundry."

The e-mailers are old and young, men and women, and seem to be spread around the world. If they have anything in common, it's their sense that Future Me is someone connected but Other, like a distant older sibling—same parents, same genes, but a different set of experiences and perspectives.

Read in one sitting, as a single work of improvisational reportage, the e-mails give a rare glimpse into the collective unconscious at this tenuous moment in history. One e-mailer wonders if the world is at peace. Another wonders if it exists at all. Occasionally an e-mail sounds like a fragment from an edge-of-your-seat novel, with just a suggestion of the vivid characters and bizarre plots.

A woman writes her Future Self to ask if she's in a "love marriage" or an "arrange" marriage. If arranged, she says gamely, I hope you're making the best of things. Another woman writes her Future Self about her new career: "You are still scared about working in the Phone Sex industry despite your mother's blessings."

A 13-year-old tries to shake up his complacent, conventional Future Self, but it sounds futile:

"are you cooped up in some bank, writing [expletive] reports for 60k a year?"

"Go.

"Go see the world. pass out in india.

"wake up in africa.

"smoke weed with buddhists.

"LIVE

"I know you though

"you won't go."

A dissatisfied virgin gives her Future Self permission to cut loose: "If you are still a virgin by this date, give up on waiting for love and go [expletive] for christ's sake. Make sure the guy has no obvious ills, make sure he wears a condom, and just [expletive]. Feel it.

"You've waited long enough, and you shouldn't feel guilty or dirty for wanting to . . . go find someone to [expletive]. Now. Do it. Craigslist, at a bar, a friend, whatever."

Many e-mails talk about losing weight. More talk about finding love: "You are single now and the closest thing you have to a girlfriend is your friend's wife. Have you messed around with her anymore?"

A common presumption runs through the e-mails that whatever the problem, Future

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 32]

at Walmart, maybe get Anthony to come along too. Good luck, love you.  
written: 2006-08-15  
sending: 2007-07-24

**Dear FutureMe,**

When you get this, and consider your life at 27 back when I wrote you this message, you will be inclined to be nostalgic. Don't be. It wasn't all that grand. It was fine, but not much more than that.

Similarly, as I write this, I am inclined to think about you and how great you will be and all the things that you will accomplish. I am mistaken.

You will be fine. But, despite your degree from a fancy college and high SAT scores, you will not be President or CEO.

You will be somewhat accomplished, with a comfortable income, but feeling like you should be doing more for the good of society. Your mood will ebb and flow, just as mine does now. You will be in decent physical shape, but probably wish you could lose a few pounds -- just as I do now.

In truth, FutureMe, we're not all that different, are we?

Sincerely,

PastMe

written: 2006-07-05  
sending: 2016-07-05

**Dear FutureMe:**

hi... this is your 17 year old self. im pretty much terrified at the thought that

# Dear Me

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19] Me will have more courage, more power to act. Typical is the wife who goads her Future Self to do the right thing: “If he’s still being selfish—if he’s still thinking of himself before anyone else, if he’s still sitting on his ass on the couch with a beer and a video game, then it’s time to do something about it.

“You deserve better. Right now, I’m trying to give him space and let him find whatever it is he lost. I know it’s not easy for him, and I don’t want to make any decisions when I’m so emotional. I pray that he has found it by the time this hits your in box.”

Several e-mails are irredeemably bleak. They foretell futures in which things undoubtedly won’t be any better: “I am a cynical pessimist who hates everyone and believes that they are all out to get me and jealous, too. Riley is four and talks back. I still hate my father. I have no health insurance.”

you will receive this in 8 years (you’ll be 25. it took me a while to get that... do you still suck at mental math?) i can’t even imagine me at 25. i’m horrified at the thought of ever being 25. i hope you’re more kind, more generous, more beautiful and more at peace with yourself than i am now. i hope you graduated from harvard ok and that you made lifelong friends there. where do you live right now? i hope it’s in an overseas country, and if it’s not, that you have plans to move soon. i hope you wake up excited at the prospect of another day. i hope you’re still excited for the future, as i am right now. remember being 18? ok at this point i cant even fathom turning 18, i want to be 17 forever. seventeen sounds young and vibrant and curious and infinite. it sounds vivacious and excited and invincible. it sounds lovely for someone as simultaneously excited and terrified of the future as i am. are you married? ew i can’t even imagine finding a boy to marry who would also actually want to marry me. it seems impossible right now. i hope you’ve loved though.. even if you’ve lost too..... i hope you’ve loved.. soo... i send this off to my 25 year old self... even though i don’t really believe that i’ll ever actually be twenty five. it’s an age that doesn’t exist for 17 year old beautiful creatures. twenty five is a quarter of a century. you old geezer.

love, m

written: 2006-06-11

sending: 2014-06-11

A few are chilling: “Have you somehow managed to walk away from all of that and go on with the rest of life, pretending that you were not forever changed by your involvement with the Branch Davidians and the message that David Koresh taught?”

Two or three should be forwarded directly to the police: “Do you still think about how it would feel to kill someone or watch someone die?” The same e-mailer reports that, while writing, he’s spending the evening alone, in his underwear, wishing someone “liked” him.

A frightened, tormented teenager writes: “When you came home from the mall, you told mom that you needed to talk alone. Soon. She started to cry She sent your cousin out of the room and made you talk. And you talked. And cried She kept telling you she screwed up everything. She said it in such a way you were so afraid she was going to do something Then she told you something that has probably ruined your life even more. Your mother, the woman who raised you these 17 years (almost 18) told you that your grandpa molested her until she was 16

“Don’t give up, for your mom’s sake.

“Love, You at 17.”

Although nearly all the salutations are the same—“Dear Future Me”—the signoffs are diverse and frequently heart-rending. They range from mushy to polite, from exhortative to self-reviling. They bid good luck, ask for mercy, express compassion. They are angry, kidding or tender. One woman writes: “hope i didn’t confuse u or make u cry.”

Many goodbyes read like dying words, and maybe they are. Present Me is always dying, always being resurrected as Future Me. And Present Me always knows it, and therefore strives to leave some meaningful last words, which sometimes achieve a profundity the e-mailer didn’t intend. A drunk medical student closes: “i really do love you. more than you love me.”

**Patrikios says the letters** have made him think more deeply about his own future. He wonders, for instance, what Future Patrikios will think of his decision to cover his body with tattoos. “I feel like the past is written all over me,” he says. “I used to be punk rock and tattooed. And the tattoos are still there. Then you get older, get an Amazon job and do yoga and buy \$100 running shoes “

Still, he adds, he has no regrets. Nor does he expect to have any when the future arrives. He’s confident that in 30 years he’ll be happy, retired, studying Ashtanga yoga and running marathons. “Everything I do now is based on the goal of being a really good long-distance runner until I’m 80.”

As for Sly, he can foresee having at least one regret in the future.

Laudable as it was to provide a free service, Sly admits he and his wife talk about what their lives would be like if he’d decided to charge, say, \$1 per e-mail on FutureMe.org.

“I think Present Matt,” he says, “is already a little annoyed with Past Matt.” **w**

*J.R. Moehringer is a senior writer for West.*