A young man meets an Illustrated Man, whose tattoos are imbued with the power to tell stories and see the future. Despite the Illustrated Man's warnings, he looks at the tattoos, which tells him eighteen stories about the following:

- A virtual reality nursery that becomes a deadly African veldt.
- A rocket that explodes, leaving its crew to die in space.
- A Mars populated by black people, now faced with its first rocket of white settlers.
- A Third World farmer who doesn't understand that atomic war is "the end of the world".
- Survivors of a rocket crash on Venus who must cope with the planet's never-ending rain.
- A family torn apart by the father's constant trips to outer space.
- A planet that's visited by a rocket from Mars the day after the Messiah dropped by.
- A priest tries to save the souls of native Martians who've become fiery blue spheres.
- A normal family faced with a quiet end of the world.
- A Mars populated by the exiles from book censorship that fights an Earth rocket threatening their safety.
- A man traveling space who refuses to believe in anything but space's nothingness.
- A time traveling couple who seek to escape the war-mongering home in the future.
- A gifted telepath who offers solace for exiles on Mars dying from an incurable disease.
- A Martian who sees their invasion of Earth turned inside-out by American cultural imperialism.
- A service that allows people to create life-like robot duplicates of themselves.
- A city that waits twenty thousand years to revenge its dead people.
- A child's game that becomes the way for an invasion from another planet.
- A poor man who provides a rocket trip to his family.
- An Illustrated Man whose tattoos foretell the death of his wife and himself.

With all these stories told, the narrator finds one last tattoo forming; it depicts the Illustrated Man strangling him to death. He flees for safety.

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