

# **The Fountain of Youth**

by Ben Marshall

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“I want some of the weed you’ve been smokin’!” Sam Beckett exclaimed, “or a taste of your psychedelic mushrooms!”

“No hallucinogens have been harmed in the making of this film,” bantered Tom Kiernander, one of Sam’s poker buddies and a fellow sales associate at Kevvexx Pharmaceuticals. “Besides, I have the information on the highest authority.”

“Whose? The redhead’s in accounting whose skirt you’ve been chasin’ the last couple of weeks?” Sam chortled.

The other two men at the table joined in Sam’s laughter. Tom did not.

“Higher,” rejoined Tom, “someone privy to the executive suite. Can’t name names or I’ll be cut off.”

“Better there than with the redhead,” smirked Sam.

The night got deathly quiet. Tom’s face lost all expression. One might have heard Kenny Rogers crooning “The Gambler” somewhere in the darkness. How appropriate for a poker game.

“Samantha,” scowled Tom, rising to his feet as if preparing to do battle. A fair maiden’s honor was at stake. Tom’s chivalrous instincts had kicked into high gear.

“What?” asked Sam. His saucer-like eyes registered blatant confusion.

A blue cloud of cigar smoke performed a primal dance between the two men.

“The redhead. Her name’s Samantha. Sam for short. And she’s classier than any other Sam I know.” Tom’s fists were clenching, his knuckles alternating between ashen white and a ruddy hue.

“Touché,” admitted Sam, the leer abandoning his mouth but not his eyes. “Forget I mentioned her – sorry about that.”

His friend slowly unclenched his fists, stretching his fingers as if to re-engage the blood flow.

“But I still don’t believe your imaginary executive suite pal’s story,” continued Sam.

Tom reluctantly parked himself back in his chair. “Your choice,” said Tom, a slight smile tickling the edge of his lips.

An awkward pause was interrupted by the sound of someone clearing his throat.

“I heard about it from a girl in research,” interjected Harjinder Singh, crushing his cigar butt on a paper plate. Classy card games call for classy dishware.

Harj worked in IT but spent most of his time developing simulation programs for colleagues in the research department at Kevvexx.

“You guys are pullin’ my leg – you’re in on it together!” Sam retorted, deliberately withholding the inappropriate aspersions that he would routinely have cast in the direction of Harj’s unidentified female research colleague. Sam’s relational perspective had never really graduated from the schoolyard.

“Not from what I hear,” offered Thurston Grosvenor, the most poker-faced of the poker foursome.

Sam’s attention flitted in butterfly fashion, landing on the owlish figure seated across the table from him.

While often difficult to decipher, Thurston was not known for feigning the truth. He was a master of misdirection and media spin in his work as a communications advisor for Kevvexx, but he was no bald-faced liar.

“They have us working on plugging the leaks on this,” he continued, “The top dogs in the corner offices want to control the flow of information like this were Roswell or something.”

Thurston, the government conspiracy theorist. The believer in past and present terrestrial visits from intelligent life on other planets. The quantum physicist turned media gatekeeper. The bespectacled egghead with impeccable credibility. Dead serious no matter the role he played. The younger, Ivy League bookworm version of Clint Eastwood.

Sam fixed his stare between Thurston’s Coke-bottle lenses. The staredown continued for a good fifteen seconds. Sam raised his left eyebrow in typical Spockian fashion. Finally, he spoke. “T.G., you wouldn’t kid a kidder, would you?”

Thurston flashed Sam his most potent Eastwood nose flare. His steely gaze gave Sam the answer he sought.

“For real?” asked Sam.

Thurston’s barely perceptible nod provided full affirmation.

Sam’s mouth gaped wide, his eyes regaining their saucer-like form. “The fountain of youth? Oh, my God...”

"Shut up and deal," Tom whined.

\* \* \* \* \*

Natalie Beckett tried not to fidget as she waited in the oncologist's reception area. She badly needed a cigarette. But wasn't that a large part of the reason she was here in the first place?

Her ring finger satellite phone began playing Pachelbel's Canon in D. "That's Sam," she thought, recognizing the ring tone, "the big oaf still hasn't lost his sense of timing."

She raised the false gemstone to her lips to respond, but then noticed the death stare being leveled at her by the colossal figure seated across the magazine-strewn coffee table. She noted bulging biceps and a scowl that spoke of possible constipation. The man pointed toward a digital sign instructing patients to "Please disengage all communications devices."

"End call," Natalie instructed the gemstone, using the device's voice technology to end the call prematurely. "Poor fella," she thought while returning the bodybuilder's stare, "all those 'roids probably shrunk his gonads. No wonder he's in a testy mood."

She immediately felt a pang of remorse. She decided she needed to purge herself of negative thoughts. Now was no time to focus on the petty side of human nature. She breathed slowly while counting to ten, then managed a bland smile at the Hulk Hogan wannabe.

"Ms. Beckett!" shouted the receptionist, "you're up!"

Natalie stood, wondering momentarily why doctors' offices did less to protect their patients' privacy than Red Lobster restaurants did for their dining clientele. "Get some of those vibrating pagers, already!" she willed silently.

She moved toward the front desk, where a white-stockinged nurse with white-frosted hair directed her through the door to one among a cluster of identically nondescript patient examination rooms.

"You can keep your clothes on, honey," the wizened woman advised her.

"Gee, thanks," replied Natalie absently. She sat uncomfortably on the swivel chair in the corner as the nurse closed the door. It was either that or hop up on the vinyl bed covered by a paper sheet. Neither option left her in position to have an eye-level discussion with Dr. Messina, and the chair was the lesser of two evils where comfort was concerned.

Seconds passed. Minutes passed. Natalie found creative ways to uncross and re-cross her legs. She wished she had brought a book. Or maybe she should re-engage her ring finger satellite phone. Certainly it was less offensive than Maxwell Smart's shoe phone.

Sixty years had brought such massive progress in "communications devices." At least the finger phones were simple and sleek, having shed all the progressively gauche distractions that Steve Jobs and his ilk had foisted upon a mesmerized constituency over the past few decades. And the gemstone with its counterpart stud earring synchronized hearing device had single-handedly (and single-earedly) brought unisex jewelry fashion back into vogue. Now that's progress.

The examination room door flew open suddenly, without pomp, without circumstance. Natalie was momentarily overtaken by a constriction in her chest, squeezing like a bra that was bought twenty pounds ago. Dr. Messina's stoic face revealed little regarding the diagnosis.

"Hello, Ms. Beckett – nice to see you again," stated the doctor, as if this were just another ordinary day on which to exchange pleasantries. Natalie half expected him to begin talking about the weather.

"Hi, doctor." She managed a saccharine smile, clearly sweeter than the pallid one she had foisted upon the muscled communications enforcer back in the waiting room. She waited for the oncologist to take the lead.

Dr. Messina maintained silence but not eye contact. His attention seemed to have landed like an errant dropping of bird excrement on Natalie's shoe.

"No, they're not Prada," Natalie wanted to say. Dr. Messina labored to clear his throat.

"Um, Ms. Beckett, I have your test results," he proceeded slowly, as if defusing a particularly intricate explosive device.

"Yes?"

His hand stroked his chin thoughtfully. "As you know, our screening procedures have advanced exponentially in the last decade or so, especially since 2015 when the 2020 Project was launched by the American Cancer Society." He paused expectantly.

Natalie followed his lead. "Yes, I think I've heard something about that..."

He caught the metaphorical ball she had tossed back his way. "Tens of billions of dollars were raised and spent on developing early detection techniques for a large number of forms of cancer. The idea was to have the technology to eradicate all deadly forms of cancer by the year 2020. That was six years ago. We're now able to identify potential tumors before they metastasize in nearly ninety percent of such cancers."

“That’s encouraging,” Natalie answered. The expression on his face still revealed nothing. Dead silence.

Finally, he muttered, “Then there’s the other ten percent. Like yours.”

Natalie wanted to give him a swift kick to the groin, to lash out at his insensitivity. But she seethed silently, as still as a south Georgia summer breeze.

“Unfortunately,” continued Dr. Messina, “pancreatic cancer treatment hasn’t advanced much in recent years.”

“So – what’s the prognosis?” she muttered.

Dr. Messina re-commenced his visual inspection of her non-Prada shoes. “I’m sorry,” he replied.

“How long?” Natalie heard her own voice from afar, as if being roused from an extended nap. She felt similarly post-sleep disoriented.

“Three months. Maybe six. A year if you’re extra lucky.”

This couldn’t be for real. She’d just had her thirtieth birthday. “Extra lucky” to have a year left? Something’s wrong with this picture. People don’t die at the tail end of their twenties unless they’re in a bad accident – right?

But there it was. “Exponential advancements, my hind leg,” she thought. The 2020 Project had brought no progress in pancreatic cancer treatment.

Statistics deal with populations. To an individual like Natalie, outcomes are Bernoulli variables. A zero or one outcome; on or off like a light switch. Actuaries and other misfits feast on this type of insight as fodder for party conversations.

As Natalie made her way back through the reception area, she called Sam on her ring finger phone. “Dial Sam,” she commanded the gemstone. Muscle Man looked up from his seat and glared at her. She extended the finger beside her ring finger in silent retaliation. Pettiness in the face of one’s own mortality – humanity stains even the gentlest soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

Armond Devereaux was pissed. His contacts in a couple of the big pharmaceuticals were hearing rumblings about a breakthrough drug at Kevvexx. And he’d be damned if his company were going to foot the bill for thousands of clients to go chasing after another wonder drug.

“Get me Fleischmann on line two,” he demanded of Julia, his executive assistant. Not secretary. Not even administrative assistant. **Executive** assistant. As in: Devereaux was a big wig.

Armond Devereaux was president and CEO of Heartland Assurance, a mid-sized insurance company in southern California. Here in the mid-2020’s, the good ole USA remained the last bastion among “civilized” countries that failed to provide basic medical care for all its citizens. The dark side of rugged individualism was to be found in conscienceless capitalism – the profit motive trumps the public good.

The major pharmaceuticals were kings of the American medical profit hill. And the insurance companies were the jesters of their courts, spinning their exclusions and pre-existing conditions in a desperate effort to keep their slice of the pie. Hills and pies – a mixed metaphor lover’s delight.

But Armond Devereaux was no simple jester, no easy fool.

“Mr. Fleischmann on line two,” called Julia to her irate boss. Heartland Assurance was old school, opting for traditional land lines rather than the state-of-the-art ring finger (or in the case of weightier callers, pinky finger) phones. Devereaux pushed the speaker button on the base of the archaic desk phone.

“Myron, it’s Devereaux,” spat Armond.

“So I gathered,” replied Fleischmann, “what’s up?”

“I need a favor.” Armond’s tone was less demanding than with Julia, more persuasive. Something about catching flies with sugar or vinegar drifted across Armond’s consciousness.

“Gotta know what’s going on at Kevvexx,” stated Devereaux, “it’s got me worried.”

“So you’ve been hearing the rumors, too?”

“You bet your sweet derriere, Myron. And they’re whoppers. Imaginative enough to make a fisherman blush.”

“So you what do you want to know?” asked Fleischmann.

“I need you to look into it. Talk to some people. Substitute facts for appearances, demonstrations for impressions. Ideally, get copies of the paperwork.”

Myron Fleischmann was an ex-employee of the U.S. Postal Service. The USPS was now a relic of a simpler time, drowned in the wake of the onrushing digital age. After its demise, Myron had needed to find gainful employment. He turned to private

investigation, occasionally tapping into his roots by “going postal” to intimidate potential informants.

“Are you asking me to break the law?” he queried.

“You and I both know you aren’t getting a straight answer to that. Just do what you have to do. I’ll make sure you’re compensated appropriately according to the level of assistance you’re able to provide.”

Without further pleasantries, Devereaux slammed the receiver back in its cradle.

“Son of an unmarried dog,” Myron murmured, killing two expletives with one weak line.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam Beckett spoke to the ring on his right hand. “End call – please,” he stated beseechingly, his voice quivering with each word. Waves of sorrow cascaded mercilessly over him.

He leaned back in the lumbar chair provided to him by Kevvexx, tears surging past his squeezed lids in microbursts. His desk gave him no privacy. Kevvexx sales guys and gals were expected to spend minimal time in the office and maximum time chasing clients. The second floor of Building 3 on their corporate campus was littered with dozens of tiny cubicles designed for sales force drive-by use only.

Sam needed privacy to process the news he’d just received from Natalie. He grabbed his jacket and strode purposefully out of the building, toward Building 2. He reached his destination, kicking a locker as he entered the men’s change room adjoining the Kevvexx corporate fitness center. In no time he was changed and running at 8 miles an hour on one of the state-of-the-art treadmills.

“It can’t be!” he thought to himself, sweat beginning to trickle down his brow. “She’s my baby sister.”

His initial shock had begun to morph into something resembling anger. “This is some friggin’ nightmare! I’ll wake up and everything will be okay...”

Truth be told, Sam had a propensity for bad relationships with women. Thirty-three years old and his brain remained stilted by teenage hormones. Look up the word “objectify” in the dictionary and you’d find Sam’s picture.

But then there was Natalie. Sam’s beloved younger sister had captured his heart from the moment he pointed a chubby finger toward the bundle on the other side of the glass at the hospital nursery.



Despite his otherwise misogynous ways, Sam placed Natalie squarely on the proverbial pedestal. She could do no wrong in his sight. Well, maybe her fondness for eating boogers when she was little was simply wrong.

But throughout her adolescence and young adult years, Natalie's biggest fan was her big brother, especially after their parents' divorce and their mother's subsequent death. None of Sam's high school buddies dared utter a word of innuendo about his sister, despite the fact that Sam himself was the master of sleaze talk where other girls were concerned. A handful of years later, Sam erupted in a "YOU! YOU! YOU!" chant when Natalie crossed the stage to become the family's first college graduate. Even in her divorce two years ago, Sam cheered her kahunas in tossing the lying, cheating bum out. Too bad she wouldn't let Sam beat the living crap out of him like he'd wanted.

Sam's legs chugged with unchained resentment at the unfairness of the news. "I can't make it without her," his inner voice whispered in his inner ear, "I'd do **anything** to save her..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Thurston waved across the Kevvexx cafeteria to Harj, motioning for him to bring his tray over to Thurston's table and take a seat. Harj hesitated, not wanting to get entangled in one of T.G.'s notorious philosophical rants. "It's okay," grinned Thurston, "we'll keep it light."

Harj gingerly placed his tray on the table, careful not to spill any of his prized acquisitions – two burgers, onion rings smothered in ketchup, and a strawberry milk shake. Taking his seat, he noticed Thurston's butter chicken, basmati rice, chickpeas and naan bread. Oh, the ironies of the great melting pot.

"So, what do you think about the news on the fountain of youth?" Harj queried.

"Do you really want to know?" toyed Thurston.

"Well, yes..." Harj responded, leaving off the "I think so" and the "but keep it short" qualifiers that were top of mind.

"Well, if the end result has been achieved, I'm very curious about the particular methodology that they've used to get there."

"You mean the kind of chemical compounds they've used?"

"Not exactly. For that matter, not even remotely. I'm thinking more about **process** than component parts." He took a bite of butter chicken and eyed Harj's body language.

Harj was blissfully enraptured by a tasty morsel of juicy onion ring. A trail of vegetable oil dribbled down his chin. "Go on," Harj managed to semi-articulate.

“Well, as the saying goes, there are many ways to skin a feline,” Thurston offered. “One might start with a slight incision at the base of the tail, for instance, or peel back layers from the umbilical region. Of course, any method is highly influenced by whether the cat is dead or alive at the outset. But the same end result may be achieved along numerous paths.”

Harj’s grimace suggested that his bliss had been interrupted. He dropped the remaining morsel of onion ring on his plate.

“Sorry, Harj,” Thurston apologized, “I’m merely attempting to illuminate by way of analogy.”

“And your point is?”

“If Kevvexx research has come up with a wonder drug to slow down, halt, or even reverse the aging process, there are some interesting questions as to how they’ve gone about it. For instance, I think we can eliminate some of the possibilities from the world according to Einstein...”

Harj’s eyes began to glaze over. “You promised to keep it light...” he murmured.

“More like *speed* of light. Which is key to the tie between space and time, at least according to Einstein,” T.G. continued.

“Tell me more. Please. Really. I mean it...” Harj rolled his eyes and raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Humor me, Harj. I need to bounce a couple of ideas off a rational human being. But you’ll do,” he smiled.

Harj’s eyes repeated their roll, but he nodded his assent for Thurston to proceed.

“One way – albeit an indirect one – to skin the cat of aging is to affect the passage of time with respect to the individual,” Thurston postulated, “and that’s where Einstein comes in. He demonstrated that time is linked to speed – as in motion, not amphetamines. The passage of time depends on relative motion between observers. If one is traveling near the speed of light, one ages at a much slower rate than if one is stationary. It’s called time dilation.”

“So when the Star Trek crew travelled at warp 1, they should have aged more slowly? I guess that’s what keeps William Shatner so spry at nearly a hundred years old,” quipped Harj.

“Well, either Roddenberry or Einstein was wrong. Just look at Leonard Nimoy after sixty years of warp speed space travel. But you’re missing the point.”

“Which is?”

“A wonder drug doesn’t send one crashing through the cosmos at the speed of light,” Thurston explained.

“I see,” Harj replied, scratching his head absently in apparent consternation. “So you raised a possibility just to shoot it down?”

“It’s good form. Doyle perfected it with Sherlock Holmes.”

“Ah,” sighed Harj, “the game’s afoot.”

“Indeed,” affirmed Thurston. “Now, to the problem at hand. The most direct route to the fountain of youth would be something that slows down or reverses the damage that accumulates to human cells, tissues and organs with the passage of time, rather than affecting the passage of time itself. But I still have to wonder whether they’ve gone after the problem by direct or indirect means. The indirect approach of altering the passage of time for individuals seems so much simpler and more comprehensive if it were achievable...”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’ll definitely see what I can do. But I wouldn’t pin my hopes on it. Insurance companies are notorious for dragging their feet on approving new benefits. Especially where experimental drugs are involved.” She hesitated, placing her hand on Natalie’s. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Natalie discerned genuine empathy in Joan Ramsden’s tone and actions. Joan had been the head of HR at Copter Design Ltd. for the full seven years Natalie had worked there. In fact, she was one of Natalie’s closest friends at the company, though that wasn’t saying much. “But,” Natalie thought, “it’s interesting how you gravitate toward people who go out for smoke breaks with you.”

After Natalie left the HR counseling room, Joan instructed her gemstone phone to connect her to her benefits advisor at Heartland Assurance, the insurer for Copter’s medical, dental and prescription drug benefits. She would negotiate for all she was worth.

Back at her desk, Natalie recalled wisps of last night’s conversation with Sam.

“But Nat, you’ve got to try...” he pleaded.

“I’m not willing to go through radiation or chemotherapy. There’s nothing that stops it. The key will simply be to manage the pain,” she retorted.

Sam had been momentarily silenced. Then a glow came over his countenance.

“Hey, wait! There’s a new drug that Kevvexx is fast-tracking to market. It’ll slow down the growth of **anything** that damages human cells…”

And there it was. A ray of hope. At least for Sam. And after much discussion and brotherly manipulation, Sam had secured Natalie’s agreement to pursue it through her company’s employee benefits plan.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It’s called TimeWarp,” the old research leader coughed. A trickle of blood flowed from the corner of his lip.

Myron let his raised fist, adorned with its designer brass knuckles, drop to his side. He wasn’t sure whether the old man’s hemorrhage was from a split lip or caused by internal bleeding from the blows to his body.

“Might have been a little too rough on him,” thought Myron.

Myron didn’t believe in bribing informants. If people who had information he needed wouldn’t give it to him freely, he’d beat it out of them. He was a card-carrying member of the macho school of private detection. And he had friends on the police force who could keep him out of hot water, as long as he didn’t go overboard. He hadn’t killed or maimed anyone – at least not yet.

Myron’s moment of concern for his victim (and himself) was swept away by the need for more information.

Myron didn’t mince words. Or shred them. Or skewer them.

“Go on,” Myron demanded.

“The original idea was for the drug – TimeWarp – to act as an inhibitor.” The old man wiped the blood from his lip, exhaling deeply in apparent relief that the attack was over.

“What’s an inhibitor?” groused Myron.

“Well, sort of like a preservative or an antibiotic, only with super-strength and super-scope,” the man replied, eying Myron warily. “In a similar way that a preservative slows down fungal and bacterial growth in food,” he continued, “TimeWarp would slow it down in the human body. We’re talking organic material in both instances. Antibiotics work on a similar basis.”

“But TimeWarp has super-strength and super-scope?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Sort of reminds me of rabbinic views of God from my days in Hebrew school. Omnipotent and omnipresent,” Myron wise-cracked.

“Indeed,” replied the researcher gravely. “When you’re seeking the fountain of youth, in essence you’re playing God.”

Switching gears from his unrequited attempt at levity, Myron asked, “Is TimeWarp ready to market?”

He fixed his most intimidating squint on the old man, silently warning him against duplicity, while keeping his un-minced word count intact.

The old man cowered noticeably. “I – I wouldn’t say that. Not exactly. We’ve had some successes, but we’ve had some failures. We expanded the scope and direction of our research with encouraging results. We’re in the process of applying for some new drug patents.”

“You expect the insurance companies to cover it?”

“We’ll be seeking FDA approval after our clinical trials are complete. FDA approval is the key to getting insurance companies to cover the cost of prescriptions.”

“That’s all I needed to know,” Myron grinned malevolently, “unless you got some papers to back it up.”

“No individual has the clearance to get at the documentation. It takes three joint authorizations to access it,” assured the researcher.

Myron nodded and left, not wanting to waste further words.

The old man shivered as Myron walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” whispered Natalie, kneeling reverently in the confessional booth, “it’s been three months since my last confession. These are my...”

Natalie faltered, choking back tears. But in the end, she couldn’t. Neither could she spit out the word “sins” or the examples that followed. Her shoulders heaved with emotion.

The gentle soul on the other side of the lattice gave Natalie time to let the tears flow, wishing fervently to be on the other side of the screen in order to comfort and console. Alas, hugs were not part of approved Roman Catholic priestly practice. Too much baggage from too many predators.

As Natalie's tears subsided, the priest spoke. "Go on, my child." The words were soothing, as if spoken by a truly loving parent.

"I'm... I'm dying," Natalie revealed.

The priest hesitated, then spoke in a noticeably higher pitch. "And, you are... seeking absolution from your sins?"

Natalie detected an unusual quality in the priest's voice. "I honestly don't know, Father," she replied, "I just needed to talk to someone. Is that okay?"

"Certainly, my child," returned the priest, "I'm used to listening."

Natalie smiled for the first time in two days.

"I... I guess I want to know what's on the other side. And if that's good, I might still be troubled."

"In what way?" The priest's tone was burgeoning with surprise. Its pitch seemed somewhat out of kilter.

"I want to know that my life mattered. That I made a difference."

The priest's smile swelled with parental pride.

"That's good," comforted the priest, "it's the quality of the life that matters, not the length."

"I'm not sure mine boasts a Grade-A quality, Father," rejoined Natalie.

"The message of the gospel is about God's grace and love, not your performance. But your humility is virtuous," encouraged the priest.

Again, Natalie sensed something remarkable in the priest's voice – not just spiritual, but physical and emotional as well.

"I do tend to have a self-defecating sense of humor," Natalie replied with a grin.

The priest laughed a high-pitch cackle, followed by a snort. Self-deprecation had never been expressed in such ribald fashion to the priest's cloistered ears.

"Priests don't laugh," scolded Natalie. In truth, she took a guilty pleasure in breaking through the priestly armor. And that last cackle had parted the clouds of mystery surrounding the unusual quality in the priest's voice.

The priest spoke with candor. "Priests are human beings. Humans laugh. And humans cry."

Silence. Natalie felt herself choking up. Then she heard a rattling sound from the other side of the lattice. Moments later, the knob on the confessor's door slowly turned. The door swung open.

The priest motioned for Natalie to come out of the booth. As Natalie stood, she saw that the priest was indeed, as she had suspected, a woman.

It had been three years since the Vatican endorsed the ordination of women. Though they had finally dispensed with the long-held exclusion of women from the priesthood, the Church could not yet bring itself to drop the priestly moniker of "Father."

The priest reached a hand toward Natalie's hand. Nat spotted a tear streaming down the priest's cheek.

The priest was the first to speak. "Our Lord told his disciples, 'Let not your heart be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.'"

"So it will be okay on the other side?" Natalie queried tremulously.

The priest smiled. "You believe in God?"

Natalie nodded.

"And that God showed His love and grace toward you through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus?"

Another nod.

"Then you are His disciple, so He was speaking to you."

Natalie smiled tentatively, then asked, "And what about making a difference in this life – living a life that matters?"

"You've made a difference to me, here and now. I'm sure that's just one small sample from a life that matters. And you're not done yet."

Natalie did the unthinkable – she hugged the priest. The priest returned the hug, and allowed herself to weep with those who weep.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Julia, bring Mr. Fleischmann his payment,” Devereaux called gruffly to his executive assistant. Turning to Myron, he said, “No documents, no bonus.”

“Fair enough,” Myron responded tersely. Two words constituted a lengthy conversation, nearly exhausting his repertoire.

As he waited, Myron noticed the sheen of the overhead light glinting off Armond’s shaved head. “Bet he has that Mr. Clean look to ratchet up the intimidation factor,” mused Myron. “Maybe I should try it.”

Moments later, Myron accepted a wad of bills from Julia, waved a two-fingered goodbye to Devereaux and left the building.

Armond stood, pressing his fingers into the bridge of his nose. He stomped out of his office and turned the corner, leaving Julia to stare. At the far end of the building, he took a hard left into the office of Harland Bozer, Heartland’s chief actuary.

“It’s true,” Devereaux declared.

“Ever hear of knocking?” Bozer replied casually. Then, without waiting for an answer, he asked, “What’s true?”

Devereaux fixed a nasty glare on Bozer. “For being so smart, you can sure be a moron sometimes,” he admonished. “The fountain of youth – like we talked about – it’s true.”

“Oh, shit,” responded Bozer, a man not prone to expletives.

“So what’ll this do to our annuity portfolio?” asked Devereaux, going straight for the bottom line.

“It depends on the magnitude of the extension of life expectancy,” answered the actuary, in typical evasive actuarial fashion. “Those payments are guaranteed for life. With the size of the annuity portfolio, even with offsets in our other lines of business, anything over ten or so years of additional life expectancy would be death to the company. It’ll sink us.”

“Damn!” replied the president, “I’ll have to find a way to stop it. We’ll start by leaking some bad press about it – extremely harmful side effects and that sort of thing. And there’s no way we’ll cover the cost of prescriptions for it under our medical coverages...”

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“End call,” Joan Ramsden articulated into the gemstone of her ring finger satellite phone. She hung her head in dismay.



"She needs to know sooner rather than later," thought Joan, "procrastination won't change the answer."

She trudged the entire way to Natalie's desk. Procrastination can manifest itself in a variety of unequally insidious ways.

She mustered her courage as she approached Natalie. "I need to speak with you," she advised, "let's head over to the HR counseling room."

The journey back to HR felt like an eternity to both of them. "At least she's protecting my privacy better than the oncologist's office does," thought Natalie randomly.

As Joan closed the counseling room door behind them, she motioned for Natalie to take a seat.

"No thanks," Natalie insisted, "I can take the news standing up."

"Okay," agreed Joan, "I'll cut to the chase. I just heard back from my benefits advisor at Heartland Assurance. They're refusing to consider any coverage for TimeWarp."

Natalie exhaled forcefully. She looked up to the ceiling, then down to the floor, studiously avoiding any eye contact with Joan. It was easier to keep her composure that way. "Thanks for trying," she managed to whisper.

"I'm truly sorry," Joan empathized.

"I know," Natalie replied. And then she did the somewhat more thinkable. She gave her HR director a hug.

Joan returned her embrace and squeezed back tears.

Natalie didn't return to her desk that day. She gave her brother a call with the news. Then she drove to the beach, took off her shoes and socks, and let the waves lap against her ankles. She enjoyed the feel of the wind whipping her hair into a tangled mess. She listened to the caw of seagulls screaming for human visitors to pitch them a piece of bread. She breathed in the salty scent of the seawater, laced with the rank odor of fish.

She watched fishermen bring in their hauls, and thought about the fishermen among the early disciples. She watched parents holding the hands of their children, raising them above the choking splash of the waves, and thought about a loving heavenly Father raising her out of the storm that raged around her.

She hung around until dark, gorging herself on the visual feast of an amazing sunset splashed by colors from the Artist's palette.

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The Steve Miller Band's tune "Fly Like an Eagle" still found frequent air time fifty years after its release. As Sam Beckett brooded over his sister's plight for the umpteenth morning in a row, not wanting to get out of bed, the song played on his clock radio. Its haunting refrain of "Time keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin... into the fyoo-ture..." penetrated Sam's brain like an ice pick.

"That's it," Sam complained, "I can't just sit here waiting for a solution. I've got to make it happen!"

He quickly dressed, forming a plan in his icepick-skewered brain as he moved.

"The testing team is three floors up from sales. My access card works on every floor in the building," he thought aloud. "I can come up with a better-than-lame excuse for being there."

For the first time in weeks, Sam felt a sense of renewed optimism. Each ounce of optimism seemed to weigh that much heavier on the accelerator as he drove to work that morning.

In the end, it turned out to be quite simple. Sam had decided on the direct approach. He would lie as if it were a pathological tendency. And he'd take some props with him.

Midway through the morning, at the time of his usual coffee break, he rode the elevator to the fifth floor of Building 3 on the Kevvexx campus.

After swiping his access card across the laser security panel, Sam made a beeline for the testing center at the north end of the building. He approached gingerly, recounting his plan point-by-point before initiating his inquiry.

"Hey there, beautiful," he flirted with the homely middle-aged woman seated at the desk in front of the testing center. She was wearing a white lab coat and a pair of oversized goggles.

"Won't work, prick," she countered matter-of-factly.

Sam stepped back a pace. Maybe he'd lost his touch with the ladies. On to plan B.

"Let me start over," he suggested.

"Good idea. Whaddya want?"

"Heartland Assurance has a courier waiting downstairs," Sam began, carefully spinning his yarn, weaving his web of deceit. "They've been given authorization to acquire a sample of two hundred TimeWarp tablets to begin their own third-party testing, so they

can determine whether to provide prescription coverage once the drug is FDA-approved. I have the paperwork right here.”

He handed the woman a sheaf of paper and his ID card. She peered through her goggles at the three signatures on the form. They looked authentic. That was because Sam had used image technology to lift the executive signatures from a hodgepodge of company intranet documents, then drop them onto the forged authorization form.

She looked at the ID card, then up at Sam’s cherubic visage. Sam had years of practice at lying to the ladies. The look of innocence now came as naturally as a bowel movement after a bowl of bran.

“Okay, wait here,” she commanded and turned away, passing through the double doors into the testing center.

Sam momentarily feared that she was about to call security. Within seconds, however, she returned with a small plastic bag.

“Two hundred – no more, no less,” she stated flatly.

She handed him his ID card, the authorization form, and the bag. Sam offered up a silent prayer of thanks that she wasn’t keeping the form. Less evidence to nail his lying hide to the wall of criminal activity.

“Have a nice day!” he gushed, winking at the stoic woman in the goggles and lab coat.

“Yeah, whatever,” she replied.

It was time to make a slick exit. It was also time to beat the bushes.

Sam dropped the bag into his backpack in the trunk of his car and headed off to begin his circuit of doctors’ office visits. Doctors made their rounds, pharmaceutical salespeople made theirs. With experience, Sam had learned to time the circuit in such a way that the doctors were nearly always in. Sort of like mutual biorhythms.

All day long, he looked forward to the look on Natalie’s face. He drove to Natalie’s place after work that day to deliver his treasure. The optimistic accelerator got him there in virtually no time at all after his final office visit. He grabbed his backpack from the trunk.

When Natalie invited him in, Sam practically bounded into her living room. “Have a seat,” she encouraged. It was good to see Sam so excited.

He sat, but kept in constant motion. Natalie recalled the way he’d bounce around while playing video games as a boy. She half expected him to pee his pants like he sometimes did when he’d get lost in the rush of *Street Fighter II*.

When Sam failed to speak – perhaps his facial muscles were frozen by the goofy grin – Natalie asked nonchalantly, “What’cha got?”

Sam pulled the small plastic bag out of his backpack. At thirty-three, the trappings of high school were still evident in Sam’s accessories as well as his mindset. “It’s something to help you out,” he beamed, handing her the bag.

“What is this?” she inquired, looking at perhaps two hundred yellow plastic wrappers, each stamped with a “TW” stencil and each containing a tiny spherical pill.

“TimeWarp,” he announced proudly, “enough to last at least six months. One a day is the recommended dosage.”

Natalie’s face registered astonishment. “Where did you get them?” she asked.

“From the lab at Kevvexx. They were free samples,” he lied.

Natalie’s eyes conveyed her disapproval without the need for words.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he insisted, “You think I should deliver them to doctors, who would then dispense them to patients. But the doctors can’t dispense them until they’re FDA-approved. And that could take another year. Time that you don’t have.”

“Well, you’ve got that right,” Natalie agreed. “But how do you know they work if they haven’t been approved?”

“The guys in the lab told me these things will break down the aging process, with no nasty side effects. That’s why they’re calling TimeWarp the fountain of youth. It stops the little microbes that cause aging, it’ll stop the progress of your pancreatic cancer, too.”

Sam’s newly acquired pathological tendency had reigned supreme for the day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Six months had passed since Sam had given Natalie her supply of TimeWarp. Natalie’s health had continued to spiral downward.

“I don’t understand it,” Sam confided to Thurston, “Natalie should be getting better. Or at least not getting any worse.”

“Why not?” asked Thurston, “Not to sound crass, but she’s in the clutches of a diabolical disease.”

“But... but...” Sam wrestled with the decision as to how much to disclose. He had no desire to rot in a federal penitentiary. But Thurston was his friend. And, better than that, Thurston was the smartest person he knew.

He decided to take the plunge. "She's on TimeWarp."

The bombshell had dropped. Thurston's face registered no hint of an explosion. He was the master of the poker face. Instead, he voiced a simple, "And how is that possible?"

"Let's not get into that," Sam retorted, "the less you know, the less you become an accessory after the fact. And the less testimony you can provide at my trial."

"I know nothing – **nothing**," answered Thurston in his best Sergeant Schultz imitation. Among his other dabblings, T.G. was a *Hogan's Heroes* aficionado. He still had yet to unravel the creepy irony of a situation comedy having been set in a Nazi prisoner of war camp.

"So, anyway," continued Sam, "Nat's been on TimeWarp for six months. But she keeps getting worse. It should be slowing down her aging process. And slowing down the progress of her cancer."

"Oh, man, I'm so sorry – but you're mistaken," Thurston responded, attempting to flex the atrophied empathy muscle that surely existed somewhere deep in his heart.

"What are you talkin' about?" asked Sam.

"Well, it's like this," replied Thurston, "I got curious about the rumors I was hearing about TimeWarp. I wanted to find out about the method behind it. So I looked into it. Cashed in a few chips, so to speak."

"And what did you find?"

"Well, I thought TimeWarp might be using an indirect method rather than a direct one. I didn't see how it could effectively inhibit each and every type of virus and bacteria. They're mutating all the time. So I postulated that it used an indirect method instead. But I was baffled by how it could slow down the passage of time in individuals, without resorting to speed-of-light travel. In that sense, my thinking was flawed, even though it was right about the method being indirect," Thurston admitted, flashing a sheepish shrug.

"How so?" offered Sam, trying to suspend his growing confusion long enough for Thurston to complete his explanation.

"Speed-of-light travel causes the traveler to age more slowly than someone at a fixed location. It's called 'time dilation'," he explained. "Time dilation slows down the **actual** passage of time, not the **sensation** of the passage of time. And that's where my postulation had failed to grasp the loose thread."

"I'm not sure I follow," Sam replied.

“The solution is quite simple. TimeWarp affects only the **sensation** of the passage of time. Like an athlete who’s ‘in the moment.’ Or a cannabis high. It gives the user the perception of time passing slowly. It will be used for people who fear aging – to slow down that ever-accelerating sense of time flying as we age. It’s not a cure to **anything** that’s dependent on the **actual** passage of time.”

“Oh, shit,” gasped Sam.

\* \* \* \* \*

Myron Fleischmann sat across the oak desk from Armond Devereaux, watching the cloud of bewilderment blanket Armond’s face. Devereaux had demanded that Myron be present when he made the call to get the latest news on TimeWarp. A confidential memo had apparently found its way to one of Kevvexx’s competitors.

“So it’s a treatment to provide the mental perception of time that’s associated with youth, **not** to slow down physical aging?” Devereaux huffed into the speaker of his relic-of-the-past desk phone. He scowled with disgust in Myron’s direction.

Myron looked away. He heard Devereaux thanking the president of Lantrum Pharmaceuticals Ltd. for the update. Myron sneaked a glance back at Devereaux.

Frowning, Armond swiveled in his executive chair. He steepled his fingers. It had long been his means of projecting a false aura of deep reflection. It had become a habit. But the ploy had evolved into a harbinger of genuine contemplation.

Armond’s misty idea finally crystallized. It would be okay! TimeWarp wouldn’t affect the life expectancies of the people owed benefits under policies in his existing annuity portfolio. And for offering exciting new benefits on prescription drug coverage, he could charge higher premiums to medical insurance clients going forward. The chief actuary’s nightmare was still just a figment of his pea-sized imagination.

“I think I like it,” he smiled.

Myron breathed a sigh of relief and wiped his glistening brow. It apparently didn’t matter that he hadn’t beaten the duplicity out of the old researcher at Kevvexx.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam held Natalie’s hand as he sat by her bedside. He pondered the question of long life while watching the rise and fall of her chest as she struggled for breath.

The irony of it all was that the word “long” can mean either “extended” or “slow and lingering.” Sam was filled with remorse at making Natalie’s last few months “slow and lingering” when he had intended instead for her life to be extended.

The cancer had wreaked havoc on her formerly vigorous body. Her skin was jaundiced. She had experienced severe weight loss. There were purple splotches mottling her legs. She would no longer eat. And the pain kept growing.

Sam felt Natalie squeeze his hand. Her eyes opened and her lips began to move. Sam leaned closer in order to hear her raspy whisper.

“Promise me you’ll treat every woman the way you treat me, Sam,” implored Natalie.

Sam squeezed Natalie’s hand.

“A wise priest once taught me,” she continued, “that even priests are human beings. You need to learn that even pretty women are human beings.”

Sam felt something welling up behind his eyes. “They have to be,” he sniffled, “You’re the prettiest woman in the world, and you’re the best human being I’ve ever known.”

“Now you’re exaggerating,” she smiled weakly, “just drop me down a notch or two on the pedestal, and bump the others up a few.” She drew an arduous breath, then continued dreamily, “Remember that they’re somebody else’s sister, or at least someone else’s daughter. And we’re all God’s creation, deserving of being treated like brothers and sisters in the human family.”

Sam began to sob. He lay his cheek against Natalie’s. “I need you to stay and teach me. I can’t do it without you.”

“Sure you can. I’ll be in your heart,” soothed Natalie, “And I’ll ask for help for you from the other side.”

And she faded off to sleep. And in her final words Sam found an ace that he could keep.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE END