

Sci Phi: Journal of Science Fiction and Philosophy

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Fast Forward By Richard S. Levine

“NanoMethusela, the choice is easy.” – Medical Age magazine advertisement

Every twenty years I have the same decision to make. Should I go to my doctor’s office and get injected with NanoMethusela? Dumb question, right?

I’ll be one hundred and eighty-five years old today, but I still look like twenty-one. My hair’s solid brown, no gray. My vision is 20/20, and my boyfriend’s thirty three.

NanoMethusela will keep me young and alive for a long, long time – no illness, little aging, competent mental facility, and an energetic sex life. The magazine ads all say how great it is to live a thousand years.

I did get plastic surgery last June, but just to remove the bump on my nose. Besides, that bump always reminded me too much of Carl.

I first met him when I was twenty-four... I was a wild waitress at the old Hydrogen Drive-In in St. Petersburg, Florida, and Carl worked next door.

Several times a week he’d hop into his fuel cell retrofitted, Mini Cooper convertible and drive through the parking lot just to stop at our drive-in.. He said it was because of the cheap hydrogen and fast food, but I knew better.

He’d always find a spot in my territory and park there. He’d say something like, “Hi Flora. I’ll have the usual,” which meant he wanted a chicken sandwich, malt and fries. For weeks I acted like I hardly noticed him – the honest truth. I’d just ask our robo-server, Scarlett, to get it for him and bring it out on a tray. But Carl kept showing up and ordering the same thing.

It was about the sixth week that I finally gave in and fetched his usual for him. Unlike me, Carl

was a planner.

Over the following weeks, Carl described his future life in detail. He said he wasn't always going to be just an accountant. In ten years he'd be a partner in the firm, married with children in fifteen, boating with the family on the Caribbean in forty.

What the heck would I be doing the next day, let alone in twenty years? I'd had a few dozen boyfriends and knew there'd be many more. Then again, marriage or a European fling might look good, wherever my emotions took me.

With all those discussions at the drive-in, we never went on a date once. Until the day we both turned twenty-five. Yeah, how about that? We both had the same birthday.

He pulled up in his bright red Cooper as usual, but instead of ordering he stepped out, flipped a button on the remote, and opened the passenger side door. I was shocked. I still remember it like it was yesterday...

##

Carl stood tall, with one hand on the passenger door and his other pointed at the seat. His black hair was well cut with short curls flowing over his ears to accent his chiseled face. His blue, pin-striped suit matched his business-like demeanor. He was handsome that day. He said, "Flora, get in. We've got a birthday to celebrate...."

Carl wasn't one to make rash decisions. I wasn't sure where we were going, and the clock was still ticking for work. But there was Carl, and I loved a good surprise.

I said, "Scarlett, take over for me. I'll be gone for the rest of the day." She nodded her acceptance as she finished placing a tray on an old Prius hybrid. She must have made a special program for all the times I left on the spur of the moment.

Carl picked me up and lowered me gently into the car seat. All the while, he had the biggest grin on his face. I was captivated by his sudden confidence. It was only after he started up the car and drove a mile down the street that I finally spoke. "Where are we going?"

Carl replied as he was making a right turn. "For our twenty-fifth birthday, I'm taking you to NanoMethusela."

"You're what? That's way too expensive.."

Carl must have planned the day out. It sure seemed that way. He pulled the car over and stopped right outside the NanoMethusela clinic. "We're here," he said smiling, and with the flip of a switch on the control panel, he popped open my door.

"I just got through telling you..." I stopped; his eyes said more than he was telling. "Are you paying?"

"Yes."

People don't buy expensive gifts for their friends for no reason. I wasn't sure where this was leading and asked, "Why?"

"Flora, my parents put money in NanoMethusela stock when I was born. They told me the money

would be there for me on my twenty-fifth birthday. I'm rich now...." Carl pulled a small box out of his pants pocket. He lifted it up and opened it in front of me. The diamond glistened in the afternoon sun.

He said, "Will you marry me?"

Still a little shocked from the moment Carl picked me up at the drive-in, his proposal left me speechless... My lips trembled and my mouth felt dry. Did I want to live for hundreds of years? With Carl? He was good company. Did I love him? Maybe. But I was impulsive, driven by my emotions. It was all too exciting. I replied, "Yes," and threw my arms around him.

We walked into the clinic hand-in-hand, signed waiver forms, and got our first injections at NanoMethusela that day.

##

Those days at the drive-in with Carl were some of the best of my life. I didn't know what the future held for us; didn't care. We had each other to look forward to every day for as long as it would last.

Six months after our twenty-fifth birthdays, we attended our wedding rehearsal. I remember my bouquet flew through the air...

##

Scarlett bowled over Carl on her way to make the catch. Carl wasn't one for pranks, but Scarlett did make him giggle. He was still laughing as we ran out to his car and got in.

Carl started breathing hard. He grabbed the wheel with both hands. He coughed and wheezed. He turned to me. His eyes were wide open, dark and glaring. They communicated nothing. My own heart began to race. If Carl had been aware, he would have heard me scream. Then, in an instant, he slumped over onto the wheel.

My Uncle Derek ran up to the car while I was pulling Carl off the wheel. He asked me to call for an ambulance as he placed his fingers over Carl's neck and checked for a pulse. Seconds later, he forced a smile and reassured me that Carl was alive. Derek's an excellent doctor, but nothing he tried could revive Carl. Thirty long minutes later, we were at the hospital.

"What's wrong with him Derek?" I asked while standing at Carl's bedside.

"We're still waiting for the test to come back," he replied.

"Test for what?"

"I read Carl's medical record. He's had a NanoMethusela injection this year, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but what's that got to do with this test?"

"I think he's in a NanoMeth coma. It's very rare, maybe one in four million."

"A what? I've never heard of that."

"Few people have. I wouldn't have known what to look for, but I happened to read about it in The Journal of Aging and Health last year. They know all about it at NanoMethusela. It's mentioned in

the fine print on the waiver you signed. They just pay off the lawsuits and go on with their business.”

With the back of my hand, I wiped the wetness of tears from my cheeks. “Well, now what?” I wailed, feeling a little dizzy. Everything was happening too fast.

Derek spoke in a matter-of-fact voice that didn’t ease my fear. “If the test comes back positive, then Carl’s going to be in a NanoMeth coma the rest of his life.”

“He’s never going to wake?” I screamed this time.

“Actually, he will come out of it, but only once every twenty years for the rest of his life.”

“How long will he live?”

Derek hesitated. I could see he bit his lip. He replied, “He’ll probably die before he reaches a hundred years old.”

“But NanoMethusela said we’d live a thousand years.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s a horrible and ironic disease.” His phone beeped. Derek looked down at the phone’s display in his hand.

“It could be something else, though. Right, Derek?”

He shook his head and showed me his phone. It read, “NanoMeth coma confirmed.” Derek stepped forward to offer a hug.

Instead, I reached down, grabbed Carl’s hand and yelled, “Wake up. Please Carl, wake up!”

I must have continued that chant fifty times. Later I prayed by Carl’s bedside for him to wake. He did not wake.

##

These days I don’t rush into anything. When you’re one hundred and eighty-five years old, you have a new perspective on life. Seconds pass by faster on the clock, and yet I feel frozen in time. After all, I’ve got another eight hundred years or more to live. What’s the hurry?

At twenty-five, I wondered what Carl would feel like in his twenty years of forced sleep.. Would time pass in his mind, or was he as good as dead?

After Carl went into that coma, I continued working at the drive-in. Money wasn’t an issue. Carl had made sure of that, but I needed to do something to pass the time and make new friends.

I was interested in training to be a lawyer, but NanoMethusela didn’t make me any smarter. Acting might have been challenging and fun. But I was going to live for a thousand years. Acting could wait.

At forty-five, I was still struggling with what to do next. It was the big topic of conversation with Carl that year when he came to.

Normally when I visited Carl at the hospital, he was all alone. Nurses would stop by once a day, but there was plenty of automated equipment to watch his life signs and keep him alive. Derek mentioned something about myo-electric stimulation to keep Carl’s body and muscles from

atrophying.

However, on Carl's forty-fifth birthday, there were three nurses at his side. I was there to watch my Uncle Derek give Carl his NanoMethusela injection...

##

For the first time in twenty years, Carl yawned. He made the kind of sound you'd expect from someone who's just had a great night's sleep. He stretched his arms high and wiggled like a cat fidgeting after a nap. He reached down with his right hand and rubbed both his eyes. After decades in a coma, Carl just opened his eyes as if he had gone to sleep the night before.

His first words were, "What am I doing in the hospital?"

I replied, "You've been in a NanoMeth coma for twenty years. Do you remember anything?"

"How long? I remember getting in the car with you and then trouble breathing." Carl looked disoriented. He touched himself on his arms, his legs and finally his face. "That's all I remember."

"Twenty years. Derek and I decided it would be best to tell you right away. You're only going to be conscious for one day and then slip back into the coma for twenty more years."

"This is a joke, right?" Carl looked all around the room. Then he jumped up, ran over to the mirror, and stared at his aged face..

I was shocked to see him get up so easily after twenty years. I looked over at Derek.

Derek must have known what I was thinking. He said, "It's the NanoMethusela injection I gave him. The strangest thing about this coma is that the person won't move for twenty years. Then, after one injection of the stuff, they act for a single day like it never happened."

Carl, his hands on his face, sobbed and said, "I can't believe this. I don't want to believe this. What about our thousand years together?"

Fate may have been a good answer. Instead, I just walked over to him and put my head on his shoulder.

He turned to face me. "I love you Flora..." Then he turned to the doctor. "Only one day?"

Derek replied, "That's about it. Then you'll wake again in another twenty years, and every twenty years thereafter until you die."

"How long is that?"

"Most patients with this disease don't make it past a hundred."

Carl didn't say anything. He grabbed his clothes from the chair next to the bed and got dressed. I just watched and waited. Carl deserved to make all the choices for the day.

He grabbed my hand and said, "Thanks for everything, Derek. We'll be back before my twenty-four hours are up."

That day was one of the best I've had in a hundred and forty years. Carl drove us to Clearwater Beach and rented a sail boat. We had a couple of drinks and snuggled on the deck until the winds shifted and practically blew us over. He staggered up to come about, and we both laughed when

he almost tipped the boat.

Later, we went parasailing. We were strapped in together as we floated on air under the parachute and powder blue sky. When we returned to shore, there were bands playing music at the pier. We danced and tried to forget that we might not ever have another day together.

In the evening, Carl took me out for grouper sandwiches at Frenchy's on the beach. It was six o'clock and the sunset was vivid with the colors of red, orange, brown, violet and hundreds of other hues.

Carl said, "Flora, I want you to have my baby. Will you do that for me?"

I sat there, silent, and gulped my margarita. At least a minute passed. "Carl, you're planning again. I'm not ready for a baby."

"Hold on. Weren't you always the one in this relationship who didn't want to plan anything for the future? I always loved the way you made decisions so quickly. I could die in my sleep tomorrow. We don't have time to plan."

"You won't be around to help me raise our child. Besides, I've got hundreds of years to decide."

"Look, we don't have to decide this today. When we get back to the hospital, they can store my sperm for later. If I wake again in twenty years, I'll ask you then. Fair enough?"

"Yes, Carl. We'll discuss it later."

After Carl returned to his hospital bed, he slipped back into his NanoMeth coma almost immediately. I slept by his bedside, hoping we'd both wake up.. He did not.

##

I'm one hundred and eighty-five years old, and to tell you the truth I still can't make up my mind about anything. The trouble with living so long is that everything can always be put off until tomorrow. There's always a tomorrow.

My life from forty-five to sixty-five years old is mostly a blur. Believe it or not, I still worked at the drive-in at age sixty-five. Never could figure out what else to do.

At twenty I wanted to do everything. If it could be imagined or requested on a dare, I would do it. Now the idea of dying young doesn't appeal to me. Why would I want to blow eight hundred years to live on one impulsive act.

And there's Carl in my thoughts again. You know he woke on our sixty-fifth birthdays. By then, we both had changed.

##

I was sitting by Carl's bed when Derek injected me first, then Carl, with NanoMethusela.

This time Carl was startled awake. Unfortunately, I was hovering over his face at the time, just looking at his peaceful expression. He rose quickly, and before I could move out of the way, his head hit me in the nose.

I cried, "Ouch!"

Carl reached up and pulled me closer. He kissed my lips, careful not to touch my nose. He said, "I hope I didn't break it."

"You better not have, or else I'll..."

"You'll what? It's not like you can do much to me. Which reminds me, are you going to have my baby?"

Twenty years and I hadn't given it a thought. I gave him a dumb answer. "Give a girl a little time."

Carl's eyes opened wide, his mouth grimaced as if I'd slugged him. "Flora, I've given you twenty years. I may go to sleep tonight and not wake up again. What's your answer?"

"You don't understand. I'm just not in a hurry."

Carl looked angry, out of control. Since the onset of his coma, everything about him seemed spontaneous and intense. He shouted, "Get the hell out of here."

"I'm not going anywhere." Leaving wasn't an option, nor was the guilt that might follow.

He didn't reply. He just got out of bed, threw on his clothes, and stormed out of the room. He didn't even say where he was going.

Carl got back to the hospital sometime late. I fell asleep waiting for him. When I woke in the dark hours of the early morning, he was back. He only had one thing to say to me before he slipped back into his coma.

He said, "Go live your life."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "I had to do it. He'll help you to understand some day. You'll see."

"Who Carl? Who are you talking about?"

##

Carl didn't respond to me. He never did. He was still in a coma on our eightieth birthdays.. That's when he died, over a hundred years ago.

I don't always go on so long about Carl, but today's my one hundred and eighty-fifth birthday. Every twenty years, I reminisce about him.. That's what I was doing this morning when the phone rang. It was the hospital. Carl's son was ill. They asked me to come right away...

##

"Carl's son?" I kept muttering to myself aloud in the car on the way over to the hospital. "When did he have a son?"

I arrived around noon and recognized the hospital, even though it had been rebuilt to better withstand hurricanes. It was my first time back since Carl died.

My heart began to race at the thought of Carl passing away while he lay there without me. If this was his son, I didn't want to miss the chance to know him. I ran fast, past the elevator doors and up the stairs to the fourth floor.

Upon entering Carl's son's room, I noticed his thinning gray hair, wrinkled skin, and a worn out finger he raised to point at me. His appearance confused me. How could Carl's son be so old?

He spoke in a feeble, tired voice. "You must be Flora."

I nodded then replied, still unsure of his identity. "And you are?"

"Carl's son, Brand. You just missed seeing my family. They'll be back later."

"How could you be Carl's son?" I almost shouted.

"It was on his sixty-fifth birthday..."

Only part of me wanted to hear more. I said, "You can't be Carl's son. You look like you're nine hundred years old, not one hundred and twenty."

"When my father left the hospital that day, he ran into my mother in a picket line. He took her to lunch and told her his story. She always said it was love at first sight, but I think it helped that they had something in common."

"What was that?"

"My mother was picketing against NanoMethusela..."

"Why?"

"She felt that NanoMethusela was destroying society."

"In what way? I'm one hundred and eighty-five years old today. I couldn't be healthier." Not to mention, Brand looked sick and frail.

"My mother and I, and my entire family, have never received an injection of NanoMethusela... But in the span of only a hundred and twenty years, I've been a doctor, a lawyer, an inventor, an artist and a poet. I've been married twice and have three children. I've always known I wouldn't live more than a normal lifespan..."

"How can you say that? You could do so much more if you had another eight hundred years to live."

"Are you so sure? It wasn't until recently that I discovered my father's final words in my mother's belongings. The letter asked me to find you. He wanted me to ask you how you're doing. In your one hundred and eighty-five years have you grown? Have you lived your life?"

I never did know how to answer the question. Carl knew that.

Brand looked at me. He must have seen that I couldn't answer, so he broke the silence. He said, "It was nice to meet you. I have to sleep now. My father wanted you to have this." He handed me the letter.

In silence, I kissed him on the cheek and left.

##

So here I am, standing in the lobby of the hospital. I know I should be getting my NanoMethusela

shot, that's what everyone else says I should do.

But Brand made me think. What if I had never had that shot? I read the rest of Carl's letter. It sounded like a riddle.

Carl said, "I once read that a mouse lives just a few years, while an elephant lives seventy. Yet they both have relatively the same number of heartbeats in their lifetime. Which life do you value more?"

I don't know. I walk over to the nurse's station to get my NanoMethusela shot. I was baited the moment they gave me that first injection.