



The Problem with Immortality

by Gary L.M. Martin

Prologue: Life Eternal

The human race had discovered immortality, and as a result, the human race was in the process of dying off.

The year is 2754. It has been nearly 500 years since the process of suspending and even reversing the aging process had been discovered. A little more than 500 years ago, scientists had discovered first how to slow and then to stop the aging process of cells. And then, a few decades

later, they perfected the process of regenerating cells, causing them to return to an earlier stage of development.

In other words, they could make people younger, and keep them young. People in their 20's and 30's froze their chronological ages. Older people rewound the clock, making themselves appear younger. Soon the entire adult population of the planet Earth looked to be in their 20's, even if they were 50 years old. Or 100 years old. Or 200 years old. Or in a few select cases, nearly 500 years old.

By this time, advances in technology had rendered material needs irrelevant. Everyone had Fabricators. Everyone had robots. People only worked if they wanted to work. The only problem, then, was... what to do with one's free time?

People who liked nuclear golf played nuclear golf. People who enjoyed watching robot football games watched robot football games. People who liked to travel around the world travelled more around the world.

But... after hundreds of years, how many games of robot football could one watch? How many rounds of nuclear golf could one play? And how many times could one travel to Venice and Paris, again, and again, and again and again and again?

And how long could one stay married to the same man, to the same woman, having sex not a hundred times, or thousands of times, but tens of thousands of times without getting bored? How long could a person enjoy the companionship of the very same man or woman for centuries without going crazy?

It was a real problem. People who had lived for 100 years, 200 years, much less 400 or close to 500 years, were rapidly growing despondent. They had done everything there was to do in life. They found that they had nothing new to live for. The world, which just a few hundred years earlier had rejoiced at discovering immortality, was now filled with depressed daywalkers who had experienced everything life had to offer, over and over and over again.

As a result, the World Government set up three programs:

1) Government assisted recycling. This was becoming more and more popular with each passing year. People selecting this option would go to a Soylent Green Center, lie down on a very comfortable bed, and listen to music and watch a holographic video of their choice. And then, after several minutes, they simply would stop... living. The process was said to be very painless and take the subject completely unaware. Their remains would be recycled and returned to the environment, as nature intended.

2) Government subsidized Weed. The World Government programmed every Fabricator in the world to produce synthetic Weed, free of charge. Weed was very powerful stuff. Two puffs would bring on a mild euphoria; four puffs would bring strong happiness; and with ten or more puffs, one could stare at one's own hand for hours on end, and never fail to be fascinated by all the textures and lines. Most people, needless to say, consumed far more than ten puffs at a time.

Weed was highly addictive, and corrosive to personal health; most Weed users lived not more than a year or two. But the people demanded it, so the World Government provided it.

For a while there was a problem with uncollected bodies emitting terrible smells; but then a smart government programmer designed a program to monitor Weed usage from Fabricators. When the program indicated that a heavy weed user suddenly stopped ordering weed from his fabricator for more than a few days, that signaled the time for the local morgue team to pay a visit and collect the body.

3) The government subsidized Dreamscape. With the passage of the 44th amendment to the Global Constitution, every citizen earned a right to his or her place in the Dreamscape, at government expense. People plugged into the Dreamscape could imagine anything--friends, family, lovers, friends, slaves--in any situation whatsoever. They could live in mansions or in brightly colored neon landscapes, or on alien planets, or be anywhere, or do anything their imaginations could create.

The only downside was that when plugged into the Dreamscape, the body, which was continually fed nutrients, started to atrophy from disuse. Irreversible damage started to occur within a year, and within five years heart and brain function typically ceased.

The effects could be avoided by unplugging from the Dreamscape every three months and spending a few months exercising in the real world; but like Weed, the Dreamscape was addictive, in its own way, and most people who plugged in, never plugged out.

So the World Government maintained huge underground banks of Dreamscape farms. At first, demand far outstripped supply, but after a few years, spaces rapidly opened up, and now anyone who wanted to could quickly get a slot.

As a result, nearly two thirds of the world's population had either killed itself, was dying slowly in the Dreamscape, or dying a little less slowly on Weed.

The more hardy one third of the Earth's former population of 30 billion people who rejected these options struggled to maintain their sanity. And they certainly didn't produce enough children to replace all the others who had selected Weed or the Dreamscape.

As a result, the Earth's population was shrinking rapidly, and those few who rejected Weed and the Dreamscape struggled to find a reason, any reason, to want to stay alive.

This was the price of immortality.

And such was the state of affairs in the year 2754.

Chapter 1: The End

"It's over," said Anson sadly.

"No," said Jennifer, tears in her eyes. "No, Anson, please."

"I'm sorry," said Anson. "I just can't do this anymore."

Anson Ford had been married to Jennifer Spaulding for 311 years. Unlike most couples, who nowadays waited decades, or longer, before they got married, Anson and met Jennifer right after college and immediately fell in love. They had been married less than two years later while he was still in Graduate School for Life Studies (soon to be called Fixer Studies), and while she was working towards a Ph.D. in Music and Fine Art.

They had had a long, happy relationship. The first 50 years were wonderful. Splendid. Like a long honeymoon. They barely argued. They were of one mind about most things, and deeply in love, and were the perfect complement to each other. They had the idealized, perfect marriage.

The second 50 years were also good. Their feelings towards each other grew and matured; not as intense, perhaps, but still quite strong. They had locked their chronological age, him at 32 and her at 28, because, as she said shyly in bed one night, she liked to date older, more experienced men.

But things started to drag in their next hundred years of marriage, from 100 to 200. They still loved each other passionately, but the beginning of weariness crept in.

By the third hundred years, from 200 to 300, Anson and Jennifer were still in love with each other, but it was a calm, mature love. Much of the passion was gone. They were a good team, a good fit for each other. But neither could be said to be wild for the other. They knew each other *extremely* well; they usually knew what the other was going to say before he or she said it, and while there was a comfortable familiarity about it, a certain restlessness started to set in. Especially for Anson.

After three hundred years of marriage, Anson started to find himself more and more uneasy. He tried to find ways to rededicate his love for Jennifer. They went on vacations. They did things together. But how many times could they go together to Rome, to Barcelona, to Paris? After the 40th or 50th time, it all became a mind numbing blur. Every day Anson came home from work to see Jennifer. The same Jennifer he had seen for over 300 years. He found himself actively tired of her, tired of coming home to the same person, day after day after day, for centuries. He looked at other women, women he had never known, and started to grow envious,

and to wonder if any of them could make him feel again, like the way he used to feel, when he first met Jennifer.

Jennifer, to be fair, started to feel the same weariness. Time started to grind down her love for Anson as well. But her love for him remained strong and true. She didn't want to cast him aside for the great unknown.

But finally, after 311 years of marriage, Anson had had enough. He had gone to a party the night before, filled with beautiful young women (many of whom were centuries old, but all of whom looked in their 20's), women he could never have. Anson felt trapped in his marriage with the same old Jennifer. He yearned for new experiences.

He thought about suggesting to Jennifer that they have an open relationship, that they see other people, but he knew how insulted Jennifer would be. When it came to matters of the heart, Jennifer was old fashioned.

Anson could have gone behind Jennifer's back. It would have been easy enough. His work required a lot of travel. Jennifer would never have known.

But though Anson's attraction for Jennifer had worn down after 311 years, his respect for her had not diminished. He couldn't do that to her. Not his Jennifer.

It was best if it were a clean break.

"I'm sorry," he said, packing the last of his belongings into his suitcase. "Close," he said, and it sealed smartly around his clothes.

Jennifer grabbed his hands, her eyes wide. "Please Anson, think of what you're doing!"

"I am," said Anson, heading for the door.

She stopped him at the front door, and turned him around. "Anson, I love you!"

Anson looked at her face, the face he had fallen in love with over 300 years ago. She was still the same beauty, with the same high cheekbones, pert little nose, gorgeous blue eyes, and straight chestnut brown hair. But he had had her, and had her and had her since the beginning of time. It was time for something new.

"And I love you too," he said, giving her a perfunctory kiss. "But I have to go." He wrestled free of her, and walked out the door.

"Anson! Anson! Don't leave me!" he heard her scream.

Anson didn't look back.

Chapter 2: Six Months Later

Anson sat on a beach, listening to the sounds of the surf. He had rented a beach house on Kiawah Island in South Carolina. Several hundred years ago, Kiawah Island used to be the main launching facility of the old United Survey Service, now simply called the Survey Service. After the nuke of 2355, everything had been wiped out. Once the radiation had died down, the island, now in a much reconfigured shape, had been rebuilt as a tourist resort with beach bungalows.

Anson lay still and breathed deeply, trying to clear his mind. He had drunk too much last night at that party. And then later, he had had that blonde he had been eyeing all night. Or did he have the flirty brunette?

He struggled to remember. No, he was sure now, it was the blonde, definitely the blonde. She had a body that could kill in a tiny red bikini and a smile that could melt any man. She looked to be 17 years old, and it was only later, much later, after they lay in bed after doing what they did, did he learn that she was even older than him, at 472 years old, one of the very first to take the immortality serum.

"Why do you keep yourself looking like you're 17?" he had asked her, snuggling against her luscious breasts, which were far bigger and more luxurious than Jennifer's.

"I like looking young and sexy," the young 472 year old girl said, snuggling against his chest. "Why do you look so old?"

Anson didn't think 32 was "so old", but he wasn't offended. "I'm a Fixer. No one's going to hire me if I look like a teenager."

The girl gave a high pitched, teenage laugh. Remarkably, it seemed she was still a teenager in more ways than one, even after 472 years.

Anson had spent two months at Kiawah, and before that two months in Santa Monica, and before that two months in Miami, going to parties, meeting women, and enjoying what he hadn't enjoyed since the day he started dating Jennifer, all those hundreds of years ago: new flesh.

At first it had been exciting. Different faces! Different sized breasts! Different voices! Different hair! Different bodies! Different personalities!

Anson had felt a thrill of excitement each time he had plowed new ground. Every man psychologically felt the need to spread his seed far and wide. Those who married and managed to stay faithful to their wives conquered this most basic instinct, but it never totally went away; and after 311 years of pent up desire from being faithful to one and only one woman, Anson

exploded, in a sensual way. The first week after he had left Jennifer he had sex with seven women; by the first month, he had slept with 25. By now, six months later, he had lost count.

He felt the joy of immense freedom, after having his penis tied up in a cage for so long, so very long. It felt simply grand to be able to spread his seed at will.

At first.

The first woman he plowed into was glorious; the first ten women were exceptional; the first fifty women were good; and now, after six months, he still enjoyed sleeping with women, but the imperative drive to urgently copulate was gone. He had shaken the bonds of captivity of marriage, and while he could and did enjoy and appreciate sex, he was calmer now, and looking for someone who could be a longer term mate.

Not a lifetime partner. Oh no! He had learned that lesson once before. But he would have liked to find someone with a killer body and an intellect to match, someone he could pair off with, say, for a few years, and then see what happens from there.

But so far he had found no one who met his standards. Not even close. No one who even so much as moved the needle for him, emotionally speaking.

He hadn't talked to Jennifer since That Day, but had informally kept in touch with her via Judith, their daughter.

Judy told him that Jennifer was crushed, and crying every day, and Anson felt bad about that. But Judy didn't exactly blame Anson; at 304 years of age, she had gone through three husbands of her own (or four, if you counted Robert, who she had never actually married).

Short term contract marriages were considered perfectly normal now. In fact, people rarely even bothered to get married anymore, even for a defined contract term. Relationships simply didn't last that long. In the first century or two after the immorality Serum was developed, people stayed together for 50 or a hundred years before divorcing or moving on; but as time went on, marriages became shorter and shorter, and now it was uncommon for people to be married for longer than 30 or 40 years... if even that.

"In fact, I'm surprised you and Mom stayed together this long," said Judith, over the holocom. "You're the only couple I know who stayed together past 200 years, much less 300. Don't get me wrong, Dad, Mom is devastated, but I understand what you must be feeling. Marriage for so long simply isn't healthy. The human mind wasn't built for it."

"Thanks for understanding, dear," said Anson.

"You feel guilty, I know you," said Judith. "But I think it's for the best. Mom will find someone else, and so will you."

