

Witness

by Jerry Oltion

Some lessons take a lifetime to learn -- and "lifetime" is a relative term.

The immortal stood at the edge of the cliff, looking past the toes of his shoes to the talus slope below. A light breeze pressed against his back. One good gust would pitch him outward, where he would have about eight seconds to enjoy the flight before he struck the rocks, but the weather had been mild all morning; he didn't expect nature to make his choice for him.

Nor would the five witnesses who had accompanied him to the top. The three women and two men sat on weathered boulders a discreet distance away, sipping water and eating a light lunch while they waited. They were professionals; they had done this many times. They would not speak unless spoken to, would not offer advice unless asked. They had only one purpose: in the event that he jumped -- or lost his balance and fell -- they were here to confirm that Richard Demmer did in fact go over the edge, rather than skip out and start a new life somewhere else.

The pile of bleached bones at the bottom of the cliff attested to the number of people who had taken the quick way down, but in the last few years, Richard had talked with several would-be leapers who had walked back to civilization. He had that option.

He didn't expect to take it. He felt every minute of his three hundred and seven years on Earth, felt them as if each one had been a coat of paint layered over his psyche, their individual weight negligible but their accumulated tonnage enough to crush him under the burden of his own memories. It was a common enough complaint these days. The media called people like him "angsters."

Youngsters called them "ennuinnies" and celebrated when they opted out. They had reason enough to celebrate: World population was stable at forty billion, but only by dint of draconian fertility laws. Anyone who wanted a child had to inherit the birthright from someone who died, and death had ceased being inevitable nearly a millennium ago.

The peak was too high for vultures. Either that or they knew Richard wouldn't jump. If so, they were more certain than he. He hadn't climbed the mountain just to admire the view. He was a family man, and his family was counting on him to do the right thing. He had never let them down before, and he didn't plan to now.

On the other hand, he did have a few things to sort out before he jumped. A few thoughts to put in order. He had hoped he could put his mind at ease on the way up -- one reason he'd opted for the cliff instead of merely taking poison at home -- but the rocky slope had taken his full concentration, and now here he stood at the edge of the precipice, just as confused as ever.

It certainly was a nice view. Cloud Peak was the tallest of the dozen or so jagged granite mountains that formed the backbone of the range. From the top, he could see forested valleys stretching away in all directions, their silver streams and deep blue lakes glittering in the sunlight. Nearer at hand, the rough gray granite glittered with sparkles of its own, while beyond, the wilderness area came to an abrupt halt against the worldcity, whose millions of apartment windows sparkled just as brightly. Scattered cumulus clouds cast shadows over a few random blocks, providing more accent than shade, though above the horizon a wall of darkness promised a storm later this afternoon. If he didn't jump, he was likely to get wet on the way down.

Theoretically, no one would fault him for simply going home and resuming his life, but he knew how disappointed his granddaughter would be if he returned in one piece. She had been anticipating this moment since he had applied for the wilderness area entrance permit on his three hundredth birthday. She already had the name picked out for the baby. She had her pick of fathers, too, although Richard knew she had already decided on the musician. She was probably moving her things into his apartment even now.

Or into Richard's. His was nearly five hundred square feet, and he'd paid his rent through the end of the month. It would make a fine honeymoon suite. Teresa was not the type of girl to let that kind of opportunity go to waste.

He heard footsteps behind him, and the hair stood up on the back of his neck. He stepped away from the cliff and turned around, expecting to see one of the witnesses finally grown impatient enough to disturb him, but all five of them were still on their boulders, looking back down the rocky flank of the mountain they had climbed to get there. Four heads were rising into view: another leaper and his party.

Richard looked once more at the ragged line between rock and air. He should jump now and leave the mountaintop unencumbered for the next person. Then again, perhaps a bloody corpse at the bottom of the cliff would put them off just as badly. Hmm. What should he do? This wasn't the sort of social dilemma often discussed in the Population Control Bureau's coping guidelines.

He decided to wait. At least that way if he'd chosen wrong, he could correct his mistake.

The other people took their time reaching the top. There were two women and two men. It was hard to judge age in an era of perpetual health, but there were clues in the way people carried themselves. Even at a distance, Richard could tell that all four of the newcomers were old enough to be angsters. For a moment he wondered if they were all going to leap together, but then he remembered that there had to be at least three witnesses. They wouldn't have known that Richard's party would be at the top when they got there, so that meant only one of them intended to jump.

He stepped farther away from the edge as they approached. His witnesses hadn't greeted the newcomers, but Richard was under no obligation to stay silent. "Hello," he called out. "Nice day, isn't it?"

One of the women, a slightly overweight platinum blonde in a light green jacket, laughed, her voice thin and breathy from exertion. "Hah. It's a good day to die," she said.

"Yes," Richard said. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"A good day to stand on the edge and contemplate your place in the Universe, too, eh?"

"Mmm-hmm."

Her witnesses moved off to join his. She lowered herself carefully to sit on a rock beside him, then pulled her belt bag around in front, unzipped it, and took out her water bottle. She unscrewed the lid and took a long drink, then offered some to Richard.

"I've got my own," he said. "But thanks." There was something odd about the skin on her arms. It seemed thin and pale, and too large for her body.

She shrugged. "Nothing to thank me for. It's easy to be generous when you've got enough for the rest of your life."

"You're going to jump, then?"

The breeze caught a lock of her hair and dropped it into her face. Richard suddenly realized that it wasn't dyed white; that was her natural color. He tried not to stare as she tucked it behind her ear and said, "Not much point in climbing all the way up here if you're

not going to jump, is there?"

He tilted his head toward the eight witnesses without looking away from her wrinkled face. "They did."

"Yeah, well, they're young. Young people do foolish things."

He wondered how old she was if she thought her witnesses were young. He suddenly felt uncomfortable standing over her, so he sat down on a rock beside her. It was slanted to the left, so he had to brace himself with a foot to keep from sliding off.

"It looks like old people do foolish things, too," he said. "How long have you been off Telomase?"

"Fifty years," she replied easily, the way someone might say, "Since Tuesday."

"Fifty _years? Wh_y_? _"

She waved her left hand dismissively. "Why not? I knew I'd be bowing out in a few decades; there didn't seem to be any point in wasting the stuff."

"But ... doesn't it hurt? You're wearing out! Look at your knuckles -- that must be arthritis."

"It is. And yes, it hurts. I've got it in my knees and feet, too. That's part of why I decided to get it over with."

He didn't know what to say to that. The very idea of allowing a medical imbalance to persist seemed insane. Of course, wanting to kill yourself had once been considered insane, too, but still....

"You don't recognize me, do you?" she asked.

"How could I?"

"Look." She tilted her head a little to the side, giving him a hint of her profile as well as the straight-on view.

He tried to see past the wrinkled skin with its dark blotches of melanin and bristly hairs sprouting from unlikely places. She had high cheekbones, a straight nose, green eyes, a narrow mouth with thin lips, and a pointy chin. She would have been a beauty when Richard was a hundred or so, but now the ideal was much more rounded.

Then she smiled, and the next thing he knew, he had slid off his slanted rock and landed hard on his butt. "Cindy McFadden," he said, his surprise and his pain giving her name the inflection of profanity.

"Ah, so you do know me," she said.

"By reputation only." He stood up again and extended his right hand toward her. "I -- I'm honored."

"Oh, shut up," she said. "And sit down." The way she said it made it clear she wasn't angry, just tired.

He sat, this time wiggling the rock around and wedging it against another so it was a little more level.

"What was it like in the twentieth century?" he asked.

She laughed. "That's always the first question. The second one is, 'How many children have you had?' The answer to that is twelve, and the answer to the next question is that I was young and foolish. The eight who are still alive are all over seven hundred now. I've got sixteen grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren, five great-great grandchildren, and one gee-three. My progeny take up thirty-eight times my space. I'm not proud of that."

"You ... but ... well -- " He swallowed and tried again. "Times were different then, weren't they?"

She took another drink from her water bottle, then set it down on the rock at her feet. "_Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose,"_ she said. "We knew we had a population

problem back then, too. People were starving in Africa when there were only four billion of us. But I was from North America, and we didn't care about that. Africa was halfway around the world! It took a whole day just to get there. Of course, nobody would have gone even if it was instantaneous because it was so depressing, but we managed to ignore what was going on in Ethiopia and Somalia and the like. I had six kids before I could even _spell_ Ethiopia.

"And then some fool figured out what makes people age. It took me another hundred years to have six more kids, but I was still an ignorant little breeder."

She looked out past Richard. "You know, when I was seventy or so, you couldn't have even seen Black Tooth from here, much less the city."

He looked out at the glittering mosaic of humanity that blanketed the foothills and the plains beyond, then turned around to see the peak she was talking about. Black Tooth was actually two ragged points of granite less than a mile away. "Why not?" he said.

She shook her head. "The air was too full of soot. By then we'd been burning coal and oil for electricity, and gasoline to power our cars, for almost two centuries. Some people were still burning wood for heat. Can you imagine that? The smoke got so bad people were dying from lung disease. That got our attention! We almost had it cleaned up before Telomase was invented, but when people stopped dying, the population pressure brought it all back within a couple decades."

"That's why you started the Population Control Bureau." It wasn't a question.

"That's part of the reason. I'd just had my tubes tied, too, and there's nobody quite so zealous as a reformed sinner. I wanted to atone for my dozen new consumers, and their little consumers as well. But I think what really got me was when we realized we didn't have enough energy surplus left to get off this damned overcrowded planet. By then I actually cared about things like that, but it was too late. We'd burned up all our oil, and all the methane in the seabottoms, and we even went back to nuclear fission for a while, until we blew up another reactor, but there was never enough energy to go around. We needed every kilowatt we could generate just to keep forty billion people from starving. We quit polluting the planet again because we couldn't afford to waste anything, but nobody had any dreams anymore. Certainly nobody was going into space anymore. We couldn't even imagine it. That's what finally scared me enough to do something."

He looked over at their witnesses, then scanned the sky for hovercraft, but no cars violated the wilderness area's ban. He was surprised; nobody would have broken the law or wasted the energy for him, but Cindy McFadden leaping off Cloud Peak should have drawn intense media attention. She must have sneaked away, maybe even planted rumors that she was going to jump somewhere else instead.

So, the oldest human alive was going to have the chance to die in peace. Who would have thought?

"Who did you will your birthright to?" he asked.

She didn't answer right away.

"Sorry, none of my business."

"No, it isn't. But you'll read about it tomorrow anyway. I didn't will it to anybody."

He felt his stomach lurch. A birthright was worth a fortune! Only convicted felons died without willing or selling their legacy to someone. Of course, there were plenty of people -- usually childless couples -- who thought Cindy was criminal enough to qualify, but she had never broken any laws. She had made them.

"When I'm gone," she said, "there'll be one less mouth to feed. One less consumer to waste energy on. And maybe there'll be just a little bit extra to go around."

She stood up and stepped toward the edge of the cliff.

"Don't jump!" He rose and followed her, reaching for her shoulder but unable to actually bring himself to touch her.

She turned sideways. "Don't jump? That's a pretty silly thing to say when you climbed all the way up here to do just that, isn't it?"

"But -- we need you!"

"No, you don't. I waited four hundred years after the population laws went into effect just to make sure they'd work. They do. So now it's time to do the one last thing I can do to improve the world."

"But you're a leader. People count on you."

She tilted her head sideways. "People count on me? You're old enough to consider snuffing yourself and you still think that matters for something? You'd better give it another century or two of meditation, youngster. If someone is counting on you, they're taking advantage of you."

Her words hit him like a slap in the face. "That's not true. Just because people look to you for inspiration doesn't mean they're taking advantage of you."

"No? Then what exactly are they doing?"

"Admiring you! Listening to your message. Looking up to you."

"Letting me do their thinking for them. If that's not taking advantage, I don't know what is."

He struggled to voice his almost instinctive dissent. "What about ... what about friendship? If I look to my friends for companionship, that's not -- "

"Isn't it? Suppose one of them decides he doesn't want to associate with you anymore. How would that make you feel? Lousy, right? So you're counting on them to stay friendly, even if they don't want to. That's taking advantage of them."

She was wrong. She had to be, but he couldn't find the words to thwart her argument. "Babies," he said, grasping for an example from the thoughts foremost in his mind. "They count on their parents for food and protection until they're grown. That's not taking advantage, is it?"

The breeze stiffened, flapping her jacket open and shoving her a step closer to the edge, but she planted her feet firmly and pointed at the worldcity. "Look out there. That land used to be empty all the way to the horizon. Animals bigger than us used to live on it, sometimes only one or two per square mile. Now we're packed shoulder to shoulder hundreds high, and it's all because nobody can bear to deny a baby what it needs. They don't have to have an agenda to take advantage of our instincts. Not like your grandchild."

"My -- how did you know about her?"

She rolled her eyes. "Why else do people like you kill themselves? Because some sweet young thing wants a family of her own. Well, make her wait until you're good and ready, because she's taking advantage of you, plain and simple."

There was no denying that. Richard had known it all along, but he'd convinced himself it was time to give up his birthright anyway. Now he wasn't so sure. He looked out at the horizon, trying to imagine the land out there without the buildings and the billions of people living and breathing and eating and excreting in them. It would be like the wilderness area, but without the seven-year waiting list to get in.

He looked back at Cindy McFadden. Dying without willing her birthright to anyone. Now that was an idea he hadn't considered. Nor had anyone else he'd ever heard of.

She wasn't done with him yet. "I don't suppose you know the meaning of life, either," she said.

"Do you?"

"Of course I do. And I can state it in two words: Die happy."

"That's _it?_"

"What more do you need?"

He looked out to the city again, then scratched his head. Die happy. Maybe that was enough after all. But oh, what a lot of changes he would have to make in his life to do that.

"Go ahead and take my water bottle for the trip down," she said, turning toward the cliff.

"Don't jump," he said again, and this time he did grasp her shoulder. "Please don't."

She gently removed his hand. "Sorry. I'm as happy as I've been in centuries. It's time."

Then, before he could react, she took three long strides, swung both arms forward, and sprang off the edge like a swimmer off the high dive. Her jacket flapped in the sudden rush of air, the sound quickly diminishing.

Richard held his breath, counting slowly to eight. There was a faint crunch like a person biting down on a yeast chip.

He couldn't bring himself to look over the edge. The three witnesses who had come with her did. One of them aimed a camera straight down, apparently unaware that his evidence would be useless to Cindy's heirs.

But then again it just might be the most useful image in the history of the human race. Richard walked back to the shard of granite Cindy had been sitting on, picked up her water bottle, and carried it across the rock-strewn mountaintop to the witnesses. It would be important to have something of hers when he spoke of what he had learned today.

"Let's go," he said to the witnesses, and he started back down the mountain, already thinking of what he would say to the media when he reached the bottom.

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