

Pills Forever by Robert Reed

After we published two consecutive issues without a new story from Mr. Reed in either, we received some concerned letters from people wondering if his story "The Cure" hadn't had some unfortunate consequences. Not to worry, folks, Mr. Reed is alive and well and living in Lincoln, Nebraska. His latest speculation about the future is one that will probably strike a chord with a lot of our readers.

Experience has taught me that at this point, before you and I go one more inch down this road, I need to tell you about my cat:

I don't know Louise's age. Nobody does. My third wife found her roaming through the sirloin grove behind the little snowbird village where we used to live in the winter. She was a small white cat with yellow touches on her ears and tail. A Turkish van, maybe, except her fur was too short. There was no collar or chip, but human hands had held her long enough to have her spayed. She could have been two years old, or four, or maybe seven. Our veterinarian made a guess, but I forgot that ages ago. What I do remember is that he was sure that our little cat had survived inside that sirloin grove for a long time, living off wild mice and unripened meat, all while evading coyotes and a multitude of cat-murdering diseases.

Louise was never an outgoing creature, much less sweet. Her name was my wife's inspiration. Somehow that rangy little predator reminded her of a favorite maiden aunt, aloof and with a fondness for old white dresses. For another six years, I lived with both of those women, and at some ill-defined point, the cat decided that I was a trusted source of food and warmth, rewarding me with the occasional sprawl in my lap, and in moments of runaway affection, a bone-rattling purr.

One winter afternoon, while my wife was driving home from the grocery, an ancient Cadillac struck her car broadside. The 102-year-old driver had a suspended license, yet somehow he had managed to fool the autopilot into relinquishing the wheel. As a consequence, an unfortunate woman lingered for a miserable ten days before I finally allowed the doctors to suspend their ineffectual treatments. Then I sold both our winter trailer and the townhouse in Minnesota, and with my cat riding beside me in a roomy crate, I set out to build a new life.

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Except, of course, there's only one life to be built, and we work on it every day.

When I was a very young fellow, back when the millennium was new, I boasted to my girlfriends that I didn't particularly care what I did for a living, but I fully intended to live as close to forever as possible.

Their typical response was sweet nervous laughter.

"No, really," I'd continue. "Our generation is the first to have a real shot at immortality. Between advances in medicine and in genetics, plus the rising tide of wealth, a lot of amazing things are going to be possible. And soon."

I graduated from college in '03, still happily single but suddenly responsible for my own meals. I soon discovered that my little wounds didn't heal as quickly as they should. Paper cuts on my fingers and razor cuts on my face had a habit of lingering. So I began taking multivitamins. Every morning, the cheapest brand I could find. I also tried to eat better. Fruits. Green vegetables. Fish twice a week, and beef only sparingly. Plus I took up exercise in a conscientious way. Between the pills, the food, and those sweaty workouts, I started to feel and look better, and the surface damage wrought by life seemed to heal more quickly than before.

I wasn't thirty when I started playing with megadoses of popular antioxidants. I swallowed beta-carotene

until I learned that in controlled studies, the vitamin actually shortened life spans. But I kept the faith about taking vitamin E-gamma and a lot of C on a daily basis, plus an increasingly elaborate multivitamin—with zinc and selenium, and lutein for my label-reading eyes. After thirty, I joined the glucosamine club—three pills every day to fend off future joint pains. To help maintain muscle strength, I dosed myself with L-carnitine and alpha-lipoic acid. I was forty when the first super-antioxidants hit the market, and by the time I was fifty, I was wolfing down the full range of bitter, half-proven elixirs.

I have always been a creature of tiny, treasured routines.

Surveys show that within any random group of citizens, the supremely fit individuals are least likely to die. That's why I built my life around long workouts. To save wear on knees and the spinal column, I concentrated on swimming and riding fast on a razor-tired bike. Later, I added three weekly sessions of weights, with twenty minutes each morning devoted to stretching my limbs in every bearable direction.

As a rule, my most enduring lovers have been health and vanity.

Just so you know.

My first wife and I stayed married long enough for her to convince me to combat my modest balding by every available means. It was my second wife, sitting smug in her thirties, who talked me into dyeing that chemically grown hair until it returned to the lustrous, convincing brown that you can see for yourself.

That young wife had some very sophisticated products for her face and hands. Entire rainforests had been shredded just to fill a few important jars with unscented lotions and cool white salves. Tailored species of bacteria lived to erase her little wrinkles and soften the deep old ones to where Botox could finish them off. And I will admit that on occasion, yes, I played with her treasures. But the trick I liked best was the lighting in her bathroom. Special LEDs threw a soft warm glow over every surface, creating an illusion of vigorous youth that could carry any soul through another day's decline.

After fifty, I began keeping a thorough journal, recording how much time and money were spent on this living-forever business. Fourteen hours of every week was dedicated to sweat, I discovered, as well as nearly five percent of my annual pre-tax income.

Six days after my fifty-second birthday, I learned that my wrinkle-free wife was sleeping with not one, but two young gentlemen.

After that divorce, I began taking the generic form of Viagra-Supreme. Daily. In addition to supercharging sex, vitamin V helps lower my blood pressure and improves my lung performance. And needless to say, that single blue tablet is my favorite pill of the day.

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I want to warn you: When people grow old—I mean ridiculously old, like I am—they reach a lofty place where their past resembles an enormous pile of oddly shaped, plainly mismatched blocks. They can stare at the pile, and intellectually they'll understand that here is their life, each block representing a day or week or month. But most of their blocks have been lost forever, and the majority of the rest are buried and invisible inside that pile. No one can line up their blocks in the proper order. Biographies become chaotic shambles built around a few treasured days. Last month or a hundred years ago—it doesn't matter, since old minds play tricks, making every memory feel true and urgent to the ancient soul who lived through them.

Perched high on my mountain of blocks is a small black day.

I remember standing inside an office that could have belonged to a successful physician. The almost-comfortable furnishings and bright lights were appropriate to the medical profession. Every surface was clean enough for lab work, while the air was scrubbed of dust and a fat portion of the usual microbes. That cleanliness gave the place its distinct chill—which is a good thing to find in a doctor's office, I believe. Medical authorities need to exist inside cold, analytical environments. How else can they determine what has gone wrong? And where else would their patients, hearing a sober verdict, actually believe it was true?

But this wasn't my doctor's office. The back wall was covered with small cages stacked on top of one another. Other walls were decorated with stylized images of healthy cats, one after another drawn by creative AIs, the ever-changing felines always rendered in the most charming poses. The receptionist stood behind the counter, wearing a warm smile and a plastic face that looked fetchingly human until my final steps. Louise was locked securely inside her own cage, complaining mightily about her unjust confinement. I set my cat on the counter, introducing both of us. "Hello, Louise," the robot said to the prisoner. Then it generated a series of forms, telling me, "Please, sir, read everything in full and fill in every blank, then sign and date each of these pages."

As a new customer, I had to define myself: I gave away my name and address, plus a few of my most important numbers. Then in greater detail, I defined my cat, including her possible breed and an approximate date of birth.

Did my cat have insurance?

I checked the "No" box.

Poor Louise.

The form responded instantly, creating a fresh set of questions. How did I intend to pay for her care?

I pressed my iridium card against the reader's face.

The final page covered the entire screen, and because of the dense legal phrasing, I read the waiver twice. From what I could tell, the veterinarian was asking permission to treat my animal by whatever means she deemed necessary, until that moment when treatment was no longer required/or effective.

I signed and dated the last lines, and a moment later, my very miserable cat yowled and took a huge dump.

I tried not to breathe, waiting for the air to be scrubbed clean again.

But I knew better than to let Louise run free. So we just sat there, she and I, enduring that magnificent stink.

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My third wife was my last, I should tell you. That wasn't my decision so much as it was everybody else's. Insurance companies used to let spouses join policies, but not anymore. And most of the world's governments were making it easy for singles to enjoy the tax benefits held by legally bonded couples. Courtship and love might be eternal, but brides and grooms have always been a game of numbers. And since I wasn't as well-to-do as some, I had to play a careful game with what remained of my money.

Louise and I spent a decade enjoying our very cheap retirement, moving from one warm city to another until I had no choice but return to work.

In one sense, I was lucky: My next twelve years brought a good living. I had a new career helping the newly retired—people who were two or three decades younger than I—training them with behaviors and attitudes that would help them live forever, or nearly so.

An early client was a strong little woman who had endured an astonishing number of cosmetic surgeries. We enjoyed each other's company, and Louise took some considerable pleasure in sleeping between those augmented, gravity-defying breasts. We lived together for ten years, in fact, each promising the other that this was just a temporary affair and we'd probably split up in another century or two.

That lover had secrets, as it happens. I knew she had money at one time, but I'd been encouraged to believe that it had paid for her creative bodywork. I didn't understand that she actually lied about quite a lot, and she was keeping even more from me; and despite a thousand good feelings toward the woman, I didn't know her at all.

Thunderbolts arrived when she fell sick. A human physician in another chilled office determined that an unsuspected, rarely seen retrovirus was running wild through her little body.

Nature is thick with disease.

Most viral infections give no warning. Phages slip inside you without triggering symptoms. And the cleverest of these viruses evade your immune systems, inserting their RNA, in this case, into a few likely pancreatic cells, and then reproducing themselves on a modest, virtually unnoticeable scale.

Thousands of unusual ailments roam the world, which is why so many people die of rare diseases.

My lover's doctor was a youngster, barely sixty. "We don't have much experience with her specific condition," he confessed to me. "If she was your age, we would probably try to enzymatically reinvigorate key genes—"

"Wait," I interrupted. "Are you saying she needs to be older than she already is?"

It took the poor fellow several moments to piece together the puzzle. Then with a shamed shake of the head, he admitted, "I'm sorry, I thought you knew. She's twenty years older than you."

"Since when?" I asked, too stunned to think clearly.

The doctor wisely ignored my exceptionally stupid question. "She's been a very lucky individual," he assured me. "She spent a considerable fortune on every new treatment, back when these technologies were out-of-reach to most people. And unlike most of her generation, the rejuvenators worked as promised."

"Her generation?" I muttered, still wrapping my head around the concept.

Doctors know how to offer sympathetic smiles.

But of course my lover's age didn't matter at all. Stepping back, I gave a low moan. Then I asked the only important question: "Is there anything ... anything at all ... you can do for her?"

With a rational chill, the doctor said, "We have many options. Yes, sir."

That's what experts say whenever they don't know what to do. No one has more paths to follow than the man who has completely lost his way.

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If you didn't know me, I bet you could still guess my age to within ten years.

Look at this skin. It's astonishingly youthful, all things considered. But what wrinkling there is gives you clues: My face and the backs of my hands are smooth, but gullies have sprung up in the hard-to-observe places. Like the backsides of my legs and the smooth reaches of my bare butt. Implanted teeth bolster my smile, which is only a little less white than milk. I can still build up a respectable tan, but "tan" is a misnomer, since my flesh has a yellow, or some might say pee-colored cast. And while a couple million moles and freckles have emerged during my days, dermatologists keep winning the war. See what lasers can do? They leave behind speckles of cured flesh that are just a little paler than normal. Anti-freckles, I call these ghostly wounds.

Look at my muscles, and imagine my bones. I have retained a spectacularly youthful cast, I'd like to believe. Treatments championed by astronauts allow me to train in the most effective ways, and by using deep-space medications, I can slap on calcium wherever it needs to be. Infusions of hot cartilage keep my joints and ligaments pliable. (With the help of lucky caution: I never murdered my knees playing soccer or slipping in the shower.) My body fat hovers near twelve percent. And I would love to hear you say that I look remarkably good in any swimsuit. Yet the ugly truth is, I'm not as strong as my package makes me appear. Even on my best day, the world feels heavier than it should. My jumbled mind has clear recollections about how a gallon of milk hangs in the hand, but for some reason, gravity tugs harder on the bottle these days, and the arm is quick to complain.

According to my records, more than half of my medical budget is dedicated to a few pounds of blood-infused fat. I endure an annual scan that examines every cubic millimeter of my brain, comparing what's seen with a base-map drawn up nearly thirty years ago. Sophisticated cocktails of enzymes and genetic triggers help fool the old organ into acting young again. At a controlled pace, new neurons and glial cells are born, while melatonin and a host of neurotransmitters are set at the most perfect, soul-enhancing levels. And for every expensive sleight of hand, I perform half a dozen tricks on my own. Vitamins and safe stimulants come to me through the mail. Word puzzles and geometric puzzles keep me thinking along fresh zig-zaggy lines. On a regular schedule, I acquire new skills. A few years ago, I mastered juggling three soft balls. And I followed that mind-enhancing success with two years of reacquainting myself with French.

Everything is constantly changing, including me. To keep halfway informed about medical developments, I read every journal article with any potential value. I always listen to people of my general age, absorbing their gossip and rumors as well as the occasional informed opinion. That's how I learned that traveling above four thousand feet in elevation statistically shortens your lifespan. Oh well, I never liked the mountains that much.

Somebody else told me that a new species of dinoflagellates can be sprinkled on your morning cereal, and when you eat those bitter bodies, your sense of balance improves. And several respectable friends pointed me toward a Panamanian biotech concern that sells a special kit that monitors the electrolytes in your brain, then brews precise amounts of salty fluids that keep every system on track, reducing those embarrassing moments when an old man can't remember if he brushed his teeth after his low-altitude, dinoflagellate breakfast.

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Back to Louise, yes.

The feline veterinarian was a handsome woman of no particular age or race. Her voice had a lovely accent that I couldn't place, and her manners were crisp and pleasant, particularly when dealing with a difficult new patient.

She opened the carrier, claws and yellow teeth leading the charge.

An unconcerned hand absorbed the worst of the blows, and the woman laughed softly, her other hand expertly grabbing the mad beast from behind and shoving it down onto the bright steel tabletop.

"Diamond gloves," she confided with a wink.

I finally noticed the sparkle on her brown flesh.

"You know," she said calmly, stretching padded restraints over Louise's limbs and scrawny body. "If your dates are correct, this is probably the second oldest cat currently with me."

"The dates are pretty much right," I answered.

She looked up. "How?"

"Pardon?"

"How did you keep this old gal alive for so long?" She was appreciative if not quite amazed. "Discounting luck and genetics, of course. Since it's obvious your little friend is blessed in both categories."

"Thank my dead wife," I began.

The vet watched me carefully now.

"She died in a car wreck. It was two days after a shipment of medicines arrived from Costa Rica. And since they were paid for—"

"You used them on Louise."

"I guessed the dosages. I don't remember the formulas, but there was something that was supposed to help her telomeres grow long again. And my wife had a huge bottle of super-antioxidants that were guaranteed to work miracles with people—"

She interrupted, naming one elixir by its chemical label. "But it didn't pan out in human studies," she added.

"I know."

"Ironically, it only works on mice and felines."

I remembered that too.

The veterinarian's exam began while we chatted. Ten different machines jockeyed for position around the helpless, enraged beast, stealing blood and single white hairs and samples of pale flesh and green-eye tissue. Then a new wave of machines took aim, delicate probes entering her from both ends at once, taking samples from her throat and long gut.

My cat moaned her vivid curses.

Results came swiftly, and apparently, nothing the veterinarian discovered was even a little bit surprising.

"She started misbehaving when? Three months ago?"

"About," I agreed.

"The biting. The slashing."

"She's never been what you'd call warm," I allowed. "But she was pleasant enough, until one day—"

I showed her my recent wounds, all healing with a commendable speed.

"Here's what is really interesting," said the veterinarian, enthusiasm making her face look younger. "Cats, I'm sure you know ... they age considerably faster than people do. Even though you were an adult when you met this darling, and she was relatively young ... your Louise long ago passed you in terms of her effective biological lifespan...."

I'd already made those calculations for myself. But hearing an expert's confirmation pleased me.

"I should and will do more tests," she promised.

Imagining the costs, I gasped.

"But I can pretty much assure you what her trouble is." She stroked the furious cat, her hand skating down the head and bony back. "There's a low-strength prion at work in her brain. Not like mad-cow disease, since it doesn't have the same brutal effectiveness. But a key protein is still misfolding, gradually changing the shape of its neighbors. In all of history, only a few hundred cats have suffered this fate. It's a question of her extreme age and certain subtle effects building over time."

I nodded, feeling an appropriate dread.

She read my face and stroked my forearm with the same gesture she had used on Louise. "In human terms, your cat is several centuries old. And you've taken extraordinarily good care of her, sir."

"I've tried my best."

"You've done a remarkable job," she said. "The best foods, the perfect vitamin cocktails. With these tests, I can see how good you've been to her. And of course, you never let your girl wander outdoors."

"Not in ages, no."

The veterinarian sighed deeply, staring into my eyes as if trying to weigh my soul. Then very quietly, she mentioned, "There's very little I can offer. But that doesn't mean we don't have options."

Every one of my cat bites seemed to ache.

"There are ways to create new proteins. Anti-prions, they're called. I can't do it myself, but I can send samples to a lab in Bombay, and they'll do the analysis and create a proper macromolecule that we can slip into the sick brain ... and then I think we have a fair chance of bringing this disease under control. And eventually, if Louise has any remaining good fortune ... we can reverse the damage and bring back the girl you've known for all these years..."

"How much?" I squeaked.

The woman shook her head. With a quiet, careful voice, she said, "I really don't know. This kind of work is attempted so infrequently—"

"I meant my bill so far. How much has this morning cost?"

The answer involved a simple push of a button. But the figures were still growing as various machines spat out raw data.

I tried to speak, but my voice failed me.

"There are other options," the veterinarian continued. "And if you wish, we could euthanize her. Whenever you feel ready."

I felt many emotions, but none of them were ready for death. Staring at the poor creature, watching her fight against the restraints and soulless machines, I said quietly, "This disease looks like an awful way to die."

"If she does die," she replied. "This process is so slow, and there's evidence that these lazy prions rarely eat up more than one or two portions of a brain."

"What about me?" I asked.

"There's nothing to worry about," she chimed in. "Even if you ingested her brain tissue, and in huge quantities, you'd never get infected."

"No. I'm talking about my head. My brain."

"Sir?"

"If this cat is that much older than me, doesn't that imply that she's showing me the future? Showing both of us? One day, some little protein is going to turn against us, and we're going to be strapped on that table, hissing and spitting at the world."

Judging by her wide-eyed expression, the veterinarian had never imagined such an eternity. A painful pause ended when she straightened her back, and trying to smile, she asked, "What do you wish to do now, sir?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Muddle along like always, I guess."

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According to my journals, I spend thirty-two hours every week in the maintenance of my youth and good health. I also invest another ten hours caring for an elderly white cat. Nearly a quarter of my income goes toward our mutual wellbeing, and four-fifths of my worries, and from that, I think you can get a sense for how important these two lives are to me.

Extrapolate the figures, and there comes a personal crush-point just before the year 2300.

But really, what human being could spend every waking moment eating pills and doing sit-ups, all while submitting to unending scans of his tightly orchestrated bodies? Before the money and luck are gone, and before every waking moment of every day is spent on maintenance, hard decisions are going to become easy. I'll skip some little treatment, or maybe I'll forget my antioxidants on the worst possible day. And shortly after that, in a process barely noticeable at first, everything begins its inevitable collapse.

You know, each of us lives on a mountaintop.

Alone.

At first, your mountain is low and fertile. You can do whatever you want, and if you fall, you can bounce up again. But think of my image of blocks representing time: Your mountains grow tall and broaden out, blocks balanced on blocks, and eventually you find yourself standing on top of a chaotic pile with no place left to step. You have little freedom. You spend your existence holding very still, if you're lucky ...

nothing below but darkness and a chilled wind mournfully calling your name....

* * * *

When Louise got sick, I had a girlfriend. A youngster, she was. Barely eighty-five. She was a tall taut woman who according to the customs of her strange generation kept her hair shaved and her boobs shrunk down to where they would never sag. She didn't appreciate being slashed by mad predators, so whenever she visited my apartment, I was supposed to shove my cat into the extra bedroom. After my expensive trip to the vet's, my girlfriend found me building a permanent cage in one corner of the living room. The exhausted cat was curled up inside her crate, sleeping away. The woman knelt down to risk a peek, then asked, "How did it go?"

I told the story.

From her expression, I knew what she was thinking. But she didn't say it until she found the kindest possible words.

"Think of the poor creature's misery," she told me.

I'd been thinking about little else lately.

"Is this any sort of life?" she asked. "Is it right to keep her alive? In this terrible state?"

But Louise was happily asleep, at least for the moment.

"What? Are you really thinking about paying for those treatments?"

"I doubt I could afford them," I admitted. Then I confessed my thoughts to her, and in effect, to myself too. "But in several years, in a few decades ... someday ... these treatments are going to become routine and halfway cheap. So what I did ... I bought a pair of diamond gloves from my vet. I'll feed Louise and put medicines in her food and clean up after her. Then if I need, I'll get a diamond suit and goggles and spend an hour every day fighting with her."

"That's crazy," that hairless, breastless woman said to me.

I responded with a list of names. Two sisters and a brother. My parents and uncles and aunts. Three wives and one girlfriend who was as good as a wife, and half a hundred other important, much loved people who hadn't been as large in my existence for half as long as this one crazy-ass cat has been.

"This is me in another fifty years," I told her, pointing at the locked carrier. "And it's you fifty years after that."

"I wouldn't live inside a cage," she snapped.

I believed her.

Staring at me, she asked, "Would you accept such an existence?"

I was ready. With a laugh and slicing motion from my cut-up hand, I said to her exactly what I'm going to say to you now:

"Would you shove me inside a safe cage? And feed me and clean me and give me pills forever? Because if you aren't ready to do that for me ... then sadly, my dear, I think you should find your way out the door...."