

## FOREVER YOUNG

A short story by AmandaK

"Any questions, Ms. Johnson?" Doctor Simms asked. His features had the smoothness of youth but his eyes were like the eyes of an old man, tired and empty. Mary Johnson thought about the ancient saying, that eyes were the windows to the soul and absently she wondered if she, or the doctor, still possessed a soul.

"No, doctor," she said. Her voice quivered, dry and cracked with age. "I know the drill. I've been through it before, you know."

"Good," he nodded. "Then you had better get some rest now. Tomorrow's going to be a big day." He smiled encouragingly on his way out and the doors swung shut behind him. Silence descended on the room, with only the soft hum of the air purifier to break it.

Mary leaned back into the pillows tiredly. Yes, tomorrow was going to be an important day. And it was high time too, she thought when she lifted a trembling hand covered with age spots, veins thick and blue just below the skin. She pushed a lanky strand of gray hair from her eyes. Ninety-one years of living was enough. Too much, really. Her body was failing her, weakening around the core of her being and her memories. It was time for the transfer and another new start.

Tomorrow at this time of night, she would have the body of a twenty-year old again. No, not *a* body but *her* body, as it had been a long time ago, when she was those twenty years of age. And, barring acts of God, she would use it to live another lifetime, sixty, seventy years in the future. Oh, the things she might see still.

How many times had she lived now? She couldn't exactly remember, she was so old and tired. But it had to be at least five or six times, she thought.

Her eyes drifted shut, the sleeping aid doing its job. And she dreamed.

In her dreams, she went back to that first procedure, centuries ago. It had been shortly after scientists fully mapped out the human genome and had cloned their first sheep. What was the animal's name again? Dolly, yes, that was it.

Back in those days, cloning wasn't widely accepted and the advert that asked for volunteers had been discrete and sober. GenTech Systems wanted to be the first company to actually do what no one had dared to do yet, clone a human. They didn't want more

sheep, lab-rats, or organ reproduction, no, they wanted to take the large step forward: grow a brand new human being that was *\*exactly\** like its original.

Mary had always held a fascination for science and the advancement it might provide. She strongly believed that science held the answers for humanity's problems: hunger, war, pollution. And she had called GenTech. What could it hurt?

The tests had been severe. Her physical and mental health was probed, picked apart, documented. But at last, she had been admitted into the program.

Her stomach fluttered nervously when they took the cells, in the cool, sterile atmosphere of a hospital examination room. It wasn't painful; in fact, the whole procedure was a bit of an anti-climax, considering she was part of an experiment that might change the future of the human race forever.

A year had passed, when GenTech invited her to come and see the results. She walked into the small room in the company's basement laboratory and... stood stock still, her jaw almost dropping to her chest. *\*That\** was her! She held out her hand, fingers trembling, to touch that other. The other that was her. It -she- was real, felt real. Soft, cool flesh that dented slightly beneath the pressure of her fingers. Auburn, shoulder-length hair, so soft and silky beneath her touch. Even the small birthmark on her neck, just below the ear, was present. On second glance, the copy was missing the small scar on her thumb, where she had cut herself once chopping carrots when she was eighteen.

"It worked," Mary whispered. "You did it." The GenTech scientist beamed a proud grin. "Why isn't... she... moving?" she asked.

"The brain is empty," he answered, taking pains to explain it in laymen's terms for her to understand. "Think of her as a computer," he continued. "A brand new, unformatted computer. Without the programs, the routines and subroutines, it won't do a thing. You need to load software to make it function."

"Okay," Mary said slowly. "Then how do you make *\*her\** function?"

"By transferring the data from your brain, your memories and knowledge, into her brain."

She blinked. "Where would that leave me?"

"Where she is now: motionless, a plant. But think about it. She will know everything you know, remember everything you remember. She will *\*be\** you. Our bodies are nothing but a shell, really, a shell that deteriorates and finally dies, given enough time. If we can

renew the shell, we can live forever. We, Ms. Johnson, have found the coveted fountain of youth."

\* \* \*

Mary woke briefly from her dreams when the night nurse came in to see if she was doing all right and to make a small change in the settings of the drip in her arm. As soon as the door closed behind the nurse, Mary drifted back into sleep.

After that first experiment, despite strong opposition from religious and conservative pressure groups, the reproduction of human bodies had become widely accepted. After all, who did not want to live forever?

Mary had lived many lifetimes. In her second -or was it the third?- life she met a man and she fell in love. Fate had taken him from her though, in a stupid transport pod accident, when he came back from a business trip to the Moon. Rob had died, his mind and essence gone before they could get him to a hospital and connected to his spare body that was waiting on ice.

A tear trickled from her closed eyes, down her wrinkled cheek. Mary didn't feel it; she slept on.

Oh, the things she had seen in her various lives: the colonization of the Moon in the mid twenty-first century, then Mars, and on to the far stars. She had witnessed an end to poverty and crime, to hunger, to pain, to suffering.

Only the healthy people survived the centuries. New children weren't born anymore; it had been forbidden to prevent overcrowding of their living habitats. The infirm, the weak, the ones born with defects had been allowed to live out their natural life spans, in warm and caring government institutions. But they were never reborn, their bodies deemed not worth the expense of regenerating.

\* \* \*

Mary woke again, with those poor creatures on her mind. Bright sunlight was streaming in through a crack in the curtains. Today was \*the\* day. Despite having undergone so many rebirths, she experienced a quickening of her heart at the thought.

The door opened and the same doctor that bade her goodnight came in. "Good morning," he said cheerfully. "Are you ready?"

Mary raised her eyes wearily. She was tired, her head so full and heavy with the memories of several fulfilling lifetimes. "Yes doctor," she nodded.

Doctor Simms nodded at the nurse, who started placing electrodes on Mary's head and chest.

The door opened and two orderlies wheeled in a bed carrying a sheet-shrouded form. Mary caught a glimpse of the beautiful auburn hair and pale, smooth limbs she remembered dimly as being hers once, decades ago.

The doctor put a small vial with a colorless liquid onto an injector and placed the nozzle against her upper arm. "I'm going to sedate you now," he said and pressed the trigger.

The world went black and Mary Johnson didn't know any more.

\* \* \*

"Ms. Johnson? Ms. Johnson! Can you hear me?" A distant voice reached through the fog in her mind and Mary struggled to reply. Slowly, the fog lifted and her eyes fluttered open.

"Welcome back," the deceptively young-looking doctor greeted her with a bright smile. "How do you feel?"

She tried to move and found that, although her limbs felt stiff and unused, the aches and pains of old age were gone. "I'm feeling fine," she smiled back.

He helped her sit up and climb off the high hospital bed. "Come," he said and led her to a tall mirror near the door.

She gasped, momentarily confused by the apparition that appeared before her. A twenty-year-old young woman, supple and able-bodied stared right back at Mary.

"Thank you, doctor," Mary said and started her next lifetime.

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