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about 4700 words

IN THE BLOOD

by Brett Cooper

"Remember when..." Don Mack said as he joined his wife at the kitchen table. But she snatched up her dishes and stood as he sat, and he lost his train of thought.

"I'm listening," she said from the sink.

She was wearing one of her youthful yoga outfits. She'd be out the door in a moment, off to another session -- or whatever they called it. While Beverly posed the morning away, Don would be back at the lab for a full day's work. Not that he didn't enjoy his work; in fact, it was one of a very few things he found deeply satisfying. Nor did Don care to try yoga. These days, "stretching" amounted to reaching for his toes and settling for his knees. What he felt, Don supposed, was not jealousy but a reflexive distaste for inequity. It was the

principle of the matter. Beverly was free to while away her hours with optional things. Don was not. He could retire sooner, but his mouse blood research was promising and he felt obligated to see it through.

As Beverly scrubbed her cereal bowl, Don recalled that she ate oatmeal every day for breakfast. A few more memory dominoes toppled, and at last he completed his thought:

"Remember when you used to make me breakfast?" he said.

Beverly laughed once. Though it did not sound malicious, Don felt his face flush. He had taken too long to pose his question. He imagined that a mean-spirited woman might retort, "I remember. Do you?" But Beverly was patient with him. Somehow, that made it all the worse.

"Sure, I remember," she replied. "Just after we married."

Don said, "That was nice."

"Which is why they call it the honeymoon period." She brought over a box of Cheerios, a bowl and the milk, and she smiled gently, though she left the pouring to him.

Don said, "Too bad honeymoons can't last longer."

"But you still have me," Beverly replied. She hummed a bar from The Beatles' "When I'm Sixty-Four." He knew the line: "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-four?"

"Whether you feed me or not," Don agreed.

"So, I'll see you later. Remember we have the girls tonight."

"Yes."

No, he forgot.

At the lab, Don double-checked his paperwork, found mouse #9 in its partition, plucked it up by the tail and dropped it into the observation unit. He ran the tests again, scratching the side of his chin as he reviewed the results:

Strength: 93rd percentile. 212% improvement.

Energy: 98th percentile. 254% improvement.

Memory: 99th percentile. 303% improvement.

Number nine, which Don had taken to calling Mighty Mouse, was two years old. The average lab mouse lived roughly two and a half years. In human equivalence, Mighty Mouse was sixtyish, about Don's age; and yet, after a transfusion with the blood of a two-month old cousin, Mighty Mouse performed in the memory, energy and strength tests at the level of a specimen in its twenty-something prime. It was as if Don himself had transformed into a professional athlete overnight. The once lowly Mighty Mouse was a miracle, a certifiable superrodent, a 65-year old stud.

A coworker ambled by Don's work station and lingered for a look-see. "How's it going there? Any glimmers of hope?"

Don startled. He glanced up at his unexpected visitor.

"Nothing yet. Still plugging away."

"That's it: ya never know."

"Mm-hmm."

The guy mosied on. Don exhaled. He wasn't about to spill the beans on the news of the century. Of the millenium, maybe. Mighty Mouse was a hero, all right. The protein known as GDF11 was present at much higher levels in the blood of all younger mice, and a transfusion of such blood not only erased the damage of aging but also mysteriously transformed a specimen's biology, enabling it to operate at a level beyond its predicted optimal. The protein was an elixir, a fountain of youth worthy of Ponce de León.

And it was in human blood.

Without a doubt, this discovery would change everything.

When the doorbell rang that evening as Don sipped a Fat Tire Amber Ale before Beverly was to return, he was too giddy in the afterglow of his breakthrough to fret over the fact that he had forgotten who was coming.

"Hi, Dad," said an annoyingly robust and charming young man when Don opened the door. This was Jason, Beverly's son from a short-lived previous marriage. "Thanks so much for taking the

kiddos," Jason added. "Jill and I are jazzed about our little getaway."

And it all came back to Don: the anniversary weekend, the granddaughters, the babysitting, the sleepover.

"You got it." Don imagined Jason and Jill would do dinner and dancing and romance. The whole night, the whole weekend, the whole of life ahead of them.

"Grandpa!" cooed Ellie and Sophie, eight and six. They were, to Don's mind, the only medicine worth taking. The other way to look at it was, well, they could wear you out in a hurry. Especially little Sophie, the six-year old with the ever-bobbing blond ponytail. Nothing tuckered out little Sophie, not even bouncing off the walls. If Don had her energy, he would be unstoppable.

"Sophie! Ellie!" he exclaimed, squatting (not without pain: knees, hip, back). "Are you already in your PJs? Two ravishing Ready-for-Sleeping Beauties." He devoured them in a voracious bear hug. When at last he let go, Ellie raced off and Sophie tumbled and leapt and whirled and made animal noises and pulled her hair.

Over this tumult, Jason said, "Hope you don't mind they're in their jammies already. What can I say -- they couldn't wait..."

"Sometimes you want what you want," Don admitted.

Once Jason had gone, Don sat on the couch and looked at the Disney Channel while the girls paraded around the room, and he dozed.

A bright voice woke him: "My darlings!"

It was Beverly, home from her volunteer work at the senior center. (The irony did not escape him.)

"Look alive, Donald," she added, patting his belly.

Don divided his attention between two old pastimes, keeping an eye on the TV and observing his wife's bustling: the straightening of the room, the conjuring of the snacks, the piggybacking of the two little piggies. All the while, the implications of his lab discovery flitted at the periphery of his consciousness.

Like a calm interrupting a storm, Beverly eased to a standstill. "Did you know, my dearies, that the zoo is open late tonight? How would you like to see the animals under the lights?"

"Now?" Don said.

"Sure. Who's ready for an adventure?"

"Me!" Sophie blurted, and Ellie echoed her.

"Wonderful. No time like the present."

The girls reanimated, and Hurricane Beverly reasserted itself, and Don felt the urge to retreat to safety.

"Isn't it late?" he suggested. "The girls are dressed for bed."

"They can change. Right girls?"

The girls cheered and unzipped their pajamas as they dashed to the guest room.

"What's the matter?" Beverly said, her syrupy voice no longer so sweet.

But she knew what. He'd be slow. And tired. And self-conscious.

"It's fine, I'll take them," she said.

When they left, Don felt relieved and inadequate.

Later, when he and Beverly had wriggled under the covers and switched off the lights, Don could no longer bear to keep the day's momentous news to himself. He waited to be sure she was at ease though not yet drifting toward sleep.

"I made a discovery," he said in the dark. "The mouse blood experiments."

A pause. "What do you mean?"

Should he be modest? No. Not today. "I mean a once-in-a-lifetime great discovery."

Another pause. She switched her light back on. Her expression was suspended between pride and hope.

"A transfusion of the blood of the younger mice rejuvenates the elder mice. Strength, energy, memory. Good as new, maybe better."

"And the younger ones? What happens to them?"

"The transfusion must occur in real-time, directly," Don said, "And the donor may admit no new blood as it drains. I'm afraid we must empty the host mouse."

"Empty," she said. "Such a fitting euphemism for kill. And where, may I ask, is this leading?"

"It depends on the data."

"But the protein is found in..."

"...the human blood. Yes."

Beverly rolled onto her back, dropping her head to her pillow. "Don't," she said. "Please. Donald, don't you dare."

"What?" he said.

"Oh my gosh. Prove me right. Tell me what you believe this all means."

Don spoke slowly, savoring his own words, visualizing the future: "What it means, God willing, is a new direction for humanity, biblical longevity, sustained, profoundly improved quality of life, opportunity beyond our current comprehension."

It means we can look forward without looking back. It means, for me, for us, fame and money. Who knows what else? The sky's the limit. Or it might be there is no limit."

"Is that all?" Beverly said.

"That's the tip of the iceberg. But what are you thinking?"

"What am I thinking? You say 'God willing' while you fantasize about playing God. Don willing, is more like it. God help us."

"You're mischaracterizing this," Don said. "It's not as if we're talking about baby-snatching. Think of the countless stillborn every year, in every hospital, in every nation. Their deaths might one day have meaning. And think of the terminal cases, the poor souls with leukemia, accident victims beyond hope, et cetera. Opportunities abound."

"It's human sacrifice!" she hissed. "Do you not see that? What if Ellie or Sophie were one of your poor souls? Do you mean to tell me that you'd be okay with some doctor pulling the plug to drain our girls' blood for the benefit of some old fogey who can't bear to live according to the natural order? It's unthinkable."

"You're overreacting," Don said. "Our girls are perfectly fine."

A small knock interrupted them.

"Gramma?" It was Sophie.

Without a word, Beverly rose, padded across the room and opened the door. Don glimpsed Sophie's angelic face darkened by a questioning look. Then the angel was whisked away.

Don clenched his teeth and listened to the soft sounds of whispering, of water pouring, of the reading of a bedtime story, of a door closing. He tried to slow his breathing, but his heart refused to cooperate. Why did he feel so upset? Because Beverly disagreed? That, yes; but the real problem was she was not a scientist, she could not see the future Don saw. She was stuck in the present, shackled to history. She was blind.

Beverly returned shrouded in an invisible cloud of animosity, and she slipped into bed.

"We're scaring her," she said. "So, end of discussion."

Don strained to keep calm: "The natural order, Bev, is survival. What's best for the individual is best for society. It's called progress."

She pushed the linens aside and quickly stood and grabbed her pillow. "Is that what it's called?"

He watched her head for the door. He could ask her where she was going, but he knew. He could protest, but maybe it was better this way. He could apologize, but she was wrong this

time. Did she expect him to apologize for the truth? Truth was his profession.

He decided to let her go.

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On the family room couch, Beverly made a farce of sleep. She tried not to dream, and failed spectacularly. It should have been Don cast out here. It was he who deserved the lumpy cushions and the distracting fridge noises ticking and humming from the kitchen and the thin throw blanket that wouldn't cover your feet if it covered your shoulders.

At 4:45 she abandoned all hope, rose, stretched, brewed a pot of coffee, checked emails, and set about orchestrating a special breakfast for the girls. She was subsisting on a cobbled four hours of sleep, yet she would not let that spoil things. Don had stolen a few hours of her life; she wouldn't let him steal her positive outlook too, or her yoga-fueled resilience, or anything else.

First: chocolate chip pancakes. She whipped them up with a sprinkle of cinnamon and a dash of love. Hash browns next, fried a perfect golden brown in a sizzling skillet. Finally, OJ from ten oranges fresh-peeled and tossed in the juicer, enough to fill a carafe. She could have poured the premium store-bought from the carton to save time and money, but she wanted to pamper

the girls -- and, yes, she rather hoped the obnoxious racket of the juicing would swat Don from his beauty sleep up there in the luxurious king-size Sleep Number bed. How appropriate, she mused. It had never occurred to her: even sleep Don approached as a numbers game.

Once Beverly had set the table, she applied herself to the finishing touches of the smiley face pancakes -- chocolate chips for eyes, nose and mouth; whipped cream for brows and handlebar mustache.

From the hallway, a voice -- precious, small and sleepy -- called to her:

"Grandma?"

Beverly turned to look.

"Oh, Ellie, honey. I'm sorry, did the noise wake you? Well, I was going to come get you in a second anyway. I made us a special early-bird breakfast. Come see!"

Ellie shuffled through the kitchen. Approaching the table, she gasped. Her face brightened. She exuded the simple purity of pleasure distinct to the very young. "Ooh, pancake faces!"

"For my sweetheart with the sweetest face. Have a seat. Dig in!"

And she did, criss-cross-applesauce. Beverly sat, too, and relished the sight of her granddaughter joyfully attacking a

pancake. Everything about the girl -- the dangling feet, the pink footie jammies, the mussed dark curls and groggy eyes -- was heartbreakingly cute. Beverly felt a profound sense of thankfulness that she had the girls for the weekend, that she had them in her life. Her soul ached for the poor grandmothers who were not so fortunate.

A thought intruded. "Oh! Ellie: what about your sister? Is she on her way?"

Poised over another pancake that she'd now balanced on on her palm, Ellie mimicked the exaggerated chocolatey smile. Then she replied, "I didn't look."

"Must be still dozing. Should we let her sleep?"

Licking a whipped cream eyebrow: "O-kay."

"No, let's not." Beverly chuckled in a mock-evil tone and rubbed her hands together. "Won't she be surprised!"

Licking the other brow: "O-kay."

"You keep eating, dear. I'll be right back."

So, with lightness in her heart (despite the disaster that was Donald and his despicable sci-fi pipe dream; but really, in this enlightened, democratic age, it would never happen), Beverly zipped up the stairs and into Jason's old room, where the girls were staying. She stopped in the doorway.

The bed was empty. Sophie wasn't there.

Beverly called for her. No answer. She looked in the bathroom. No. The bedroom again -- checking the floor, just in case. Calling, calling.

Downstairs, straining to focus her thoughts...

Back in the kitchen. To Ellie -- "You haven't seen your sister?" The distress Beverly heard in her voice only aggravated her raw nerves. But no cause for alarm just yet. Sophie would turn up. Remain calm. It was the lack of sleep. Or the bad dreams. Or the argument. It was Donald. He was spoiling things, and Beverly had promised herself she wouldn't let that happen.

"Who?" Ellie said, kissing and slurping the last of the chips that formed her pancake's smile.

To the guest bathroom. "Sophie!"

Nope.

It's okay. Don't worry. She felt her pulse thumping. To the basement now. Glancing in the crawl space, even. Not good. The front yard. And the back. Panic squeezing her throat, hot and dense.

Finally Beverly headed to the last room she cared to check, the master, which contained the last person she cared to see, Don.

But Sophie could be there.

And why isn't he up and helping?

Behind her, the sound of little feet approaching. She wheeled round.

Not Sophie. Ellie. With a new pancake, smile and all, on her palm. The girl's eyes mirrored to Beverly that she must be on the brink of a dizzying emotional cliff. Clearly worried about her grandmother, Ellie forgot about her smiley face pancake and turned both hands to approach with a hug, and the pancake fell -- face-first -- to its demise.

"Grandma, what's wrong?"

Beverly had no clue how to answer this, so she turned away instead, and she opened the door to her bedroom.

A strange whimper escaped from someplace deep in her soul.

The bed was empty and neatly made. The room was undisturbed except for three things:

- i. A note on the floor. Don's handwriting: "There's been an accident. I'll take care of it."
- ii. Beside the note: a pair of scissors.
- iii. Beside the scissors: in the jaws of a mousetrap, six inches of snapped blond ponytail.

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Plummeting from the emotional cliff, Beverly screamed.

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A thin young woman exits a shower. With a wet palm she rubs out some of the fog in the mirror. She appraises her long blond hair. Perfect. She fixes it in a ponytail. From the countertop she collects a half-empty bottle of hair dye and deposits it in the trash bin.

The hotel balcony overlooks a verdant valley. The summer sky is a clear blue. The ageless purple mountains loom like terrible silent gods. She stands leaning against the railing, her stylish running clothes garish against the greens and browns and magentas that paint her backdrop. Behind her shades, she closes her eyes to the sun.

A knock at the door calls her back to the present.

"Room service."

She heads inside, peers through the peephole, opens the door.

A young man. Younger than her, probably.

"Good morning, miss. Where would you like your breakfast?"

"On the balcony, please."

As he rolls the cart, he says, "Beautiful day. Going for a run?"

She gives him a small smile. "How'd you guess?"

He lingers on the deck. She wonders if he's fishing for money.

"So," he says, "are you running Leadville?"

It's likely that most of the race participants are here in this hotel. She supposes that happy runners might be amenable to tipping big for good service.

"I am."

He shakes his head in appreciation. "One hundred miles. I don't know how you do it."

"I'm very focused," she says. "I set a goal, I train. Today's the easy part. One foot in front of the other. Endurance."

He smiles absently. "How long will it take you?"

"Oh, I don't know." She considers. "Thirty minutes?"

A chuckle. "I forgot to say about your special order. It's in the bag under the cart. Went to the store myself."

"I appreciate it."

"A celebration of your run?"

"You could say that, yes."

She hands him a bill. He looks at it. His eyes boggle.

"It's only money." Thinking. "In fact, here..." She reaches into her purse and hands him her wallet.

"Gosh, I can't."

"Use it for good." She's thrown him off guard. Plus, he really does want the money. Maybe he will remember her words. Anyway, this moment is just for fun.

"Thank you very much," he says, though he appears to be a bit creeped out, and he leaves without delay.

In the suite's separate living room, the young woman sits in a loveseat that dwarfs her. Her glasses have transitioned to indoor wear. She reaches for the frame and presses a button. A heads-up display appears within the glass of the lenses. The images are brighter and crisper and more transparent than those of the last device she wore, a feature she usually but not always appreciates. Sometimes it's better if the digital content an inch away from your eyeballs isn't so realistic.

"Search," she says, softly, and waits. According to the concierge, a solar flare has damaged the hotel's equipment, slowing the network. She commands herself to breathe easily. Waiting for tech is not something she -- or anyone, she supposes -- is used to, but she must not lose her cool. She must maintain perspective. This sort of glitch is insignificant, a mere gnat. She will look past it and finish strong.

A green bar illuminates the top of the HUD viewing area, indicating readiness.

She specifies, "Bloodwork."

She moves back to the balcony, sits at the table, opens the cart and transfers the food tray to the tabletop. Pancakes, hash browns, OJ. None of it looks appetizing, but this doesn't matter. She downs the OJ and then shovels a few bites of the hash browns. She'll need a few calories.

"Search," she says again. And a pause to wait for the green bar. "Trauma."

From the bottom of the cart she snatches the bag containing the special order. She opens it. Chocolate chips. Whipped cream. Good.

"Search." Pause. "Girls."

Opening the bag of chocolate chips, she scoops a handful and places them carefully. Eyes, nose, mouth.

"Search." Pause. "Six years old."

A deft application of whipped cream. Eyebrows. Handlebar mustache.

"Search." Pause. "Blonde."

She hovers over her smiley face pancake. Defiantly, she frowns.

"Select." One of the images shows a small girl with an unstoppable grin and a perky ponytail. "Top left."

The small tile enlarges to fill the screen. She reads the blurb:

Six-year old caucasian blonde female.

Life support as of 6/4.

Traumatic fall from playground slide.

Estimated donation: 2.6 liters, Type A.

\$6,000 OBO.

So much like her. Yes, this one would do.

"Select." Pause. "Insert query."

She rearranges the chocolate chips of the pancake's mouth, turning the smile upside down.

"Begin message," she says. Pause. "Caveat venditor. How high the price of blood? End message."

Would the sellers tremble? Think twice? Wipe away the message and the thought? Probably only that.

Drawing from the deep well of rage that drowns her soul, she summons strength of conviction, raises a fist, and sends it pummeling into the frowny face pancake.

She licks the whipped cream from the bottom of her fist. She says, "Submit query."

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Pushing a seven-minute pace and loving the pain, she charges up another steep pass on a gnarly singletrack trail in the Rocky Mountains in the environs of Leadville, Colorado.

And there he is. Looking just as fit and handsome as his profile pics advertising the services of Wisdom and Beauty Bloodwork, Incorporated: Purveyors of The Original Fountain of Youth.

As he crests the hill, she comes behind him, quietly, and falls in step alongside the Nobel Peace Prize-winning scientist and octogenarian ultrarunner.

He notices her. Notices her body.

"Hello," he says, not winded but flustered by her presence. People often tell her she is beautiful, gorgeous, stunning, and men unfailingly treat her with deference and trepidation, so she is accustomed to their awkwardness.

"Pardon me," she says.

He meets her gaze and holds it.

She's been tracking and training and prepping for thousands of hours, over thousands of miles, across years and years for this one moment, for these few minutes.

She says, "Are you... Ira White?"

The man smiles. "In the flesh."

"You're an inspiration, Mr. White."

"Very kind. Thank you."

"Brains, fitness, good looks. Truly, you are blessed."

"Or maybe," he says slyly, "it's in the blood."

She nods. "How old are you?"

"Eighty-five."

"You don't look a day over sixty-five." Is he blushing? "I know your story," she adds, "but I've always wondered..."

"Yes?"

"May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

They are accelerating on the downhill. She enjoys the wind. For the first time in years, she feels alive.

"You must have made many, many sacrifices," she says, "to become who you are."

"A few."

She catches him looking her up and down.

"So, like: what, for example?" she says.

"Well, let's see." He is so obviously flattered by her interest that she almost can't keep from giggling. "One: I sacrificed countless hours perfecting a method for mixing the blood of two donors in a double extraction. Two: my marriage, I'm afraid, fell victim to those countless hours."

She coughs. "That's understandable."

"The strain of work during those first years -- it was challenging."

"How brave of you." She's practiced this exchange endlessly in front of mirrors: the tone, the cadence, the expressions and all; and yet repressing both her anger and her dark glee is far more difficult than she's imagined.

"I don't know about that," he says.

She checks her watch. They have accelerated to a 6:45 pace. He is feeling comfortable.

"Only countless hours and one wife?" she says. "No other sacrifices?"

His expression sours.

"I can think of one other thing," she says.

They round a sharp turn and fly down a treacherous descent. Their footing consumes their focus. The rocks are thirsty for blood.

She swipes the face of her watch to call up an image.

"What's that?" he says.

She extends her hand to show him: a photo of a young girl with a blond ponytail.

He trips and stumbles over a rock, but recovers, and stops. She stops, too. He looks at her darkly.

"Who are you?"

From a side pouch on her hydration pack she retrieves a pair of scissors.

He gulps, his gaze tracking the scissors.

She says, "How do you spell your name? You know, Ira
White."

"I- I- I-" he stammers.

"Wrong. The correct answer is D-o-n M-a-c-k."

Backing away from her, the scientist suddenly appears
tired, weak and old.

"What do you think you know?" he says. "Allow me to
clarify."

She opens the scissors.

He shakes his head.

"What," she mocks, "will you run?"

He holds his hands up, palms out.

She reaches behind her head, takes hold of her ponytail,
pulls it forward, flicks it back and forth. "Do you find this
distracting?"

"What?"

Suddenly she attacks her ponytail with the scissors, in one
clean snip. She then casts the ponytail at him, smacking his
face.

While he's distracted, she lunges, scissors first, and
plunges the blades deep into his neck -- because, she knows,
this is the most efficient way to access his blood; and, as

she's envisioned a thousand times, it sprays all over him and her and the rocky path.

He crumples.

"As you are aware," she says. "The medical term is draining. Which is accurate. But I call it progress."

His face is already too white. "Ellie..." he sputters.

She sits beside him, quiet as a cat, and watches.

"You're thinking wrong," he says, his voice slow and ragged. "I tried."

"Tried what, genocide? Is that the new youth movement?"

He appears genuinely hurt by this. She feels the urge to end him now.

"To..." he says, "minimize."

She bristles. "I'm taking back," she whispers, "just a little of all that you took."

She dabs a fingertip into the puddling blood and paints upon his cheek a single, crimson teardrop.

He opens his mouth uselessly.

How many have died, she wonders, for this man whose blood I so ironically share?

The typical human body operates on about five liters of plasma. She knows this. She has researched it. She will keep watch until he is empty.

When he is, she sighs and says, "You should have drained me, too, old man."

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Some time later, she is awoken from a reverie by a voice that is, she thinks, far too serious.

"Hands behind your back!"

She obliges.

"You'll be coming with me," he says. He's older but very strong. These days, most of them are.

He cuffs her, so tight it would make other girls cry.

"Yes, officer," Ellie says. "I know. Society needs me."

A dark laugh. "And how might that be?"

"I'm still under thirty."

They are walking now. To a sort of police golf cart. Lame, she thinks, but funny. If she has to go, this is as good a way as any.

"Not too old yet for a blood donation, am I?" she says.

"What do you think, about five liters?"

THE END