

THE VITANAUTS

by Ed Gibney

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Reason itself does not work instinctively, but requires trial, practice, and instruction in order gradually to progress from one level of insight to another. Therefore a single man would have to live excessively long in order to learn to make full use of all his natural capacities.

—Immanuel Kant, 1784

Prologue

Date: 1 April 2040
To: Bay Area Sport and Social Club Members
From: Mark Dunn, Chief Philosophy Officer
SeNoScence, LLC.
Subject: An Invitation for More Life

Do you have what it takes to live forever? Could you find meaning and purpose for two hundred, five hundred, or even ten thousand years? Do you already have no difficulty staving off boredom and taking joy in the simple pleasures of everyday existence? Could you be a shining light to the rest of humanity that provides a positive example of what immortality might look like? If so, read on.

Many of you have probably seen the stories in the news about our company's experiments with mice and chimpanzees. We've enabled the former to lead healthy lives for double and triple their normal lifespan, and the latter to live for several years now with no sign of aging at all. The enormous excitement and fear this has caused in society has been fodder for much speculation in the news over the last few years. We've heard everything from unfounded worries about ageless rats overrunning the planet to profound heartfelt pleas for the release of any technological secrets we had developed. Through all of these debates, we stood on the sidelines, not wanting to be distracted from the urgent task we were focused on. But now, the time for armchair specula-

tion about this technology is at an end. The time has arrived for active experimentation with our knowledge, and resolute exploration of our physical and psychological limits.

We don't know when humans first became aware of death, but it is likely that our ancestors began dreaming of how to defeat it almost immediately thereafter. From our oldest legends to our latest pop fiction, we have created innumerable heroes and villains who have sought to cheat death in one way or another. We've read about Gilgamesh, who walked underwater for a plant that would make him young again; about the Knights of the Round Table, who sought the Holy Grail for eternal life; and about Ponce de Leon, who explored the New World for a fountain of youth. These and many other epic quests have all ended in failure. The curses brought down upon those who bargained for everlasting life have been shown to us too. By Tithonus, who received immortality from Zeus, but without everlasting youth; by Dorian Gray, whose unfading outer beauty was betrayed by the permanent scars his misdeeds painted onto his portrait; and by Voldemort, who scattered his soul to anchor it in this world, but lost every broken piece once Harry destroyed those Horcruxes. We've wrestled with boredom for hundreds of years: alongside Ann Rice's lonely vampires, in Jorge Luis Borges' inert City, and imbued with the existential angst of Simon de Beauvoir's Raimon Fosca. And of course, the heroes that we worship the most—the gods of our religions such as Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, and others—have each promised

us eternal bliss in return for our devotion. For as long as immortality has been out of our reach, we have striven for it mightily. And all the while we have learned much from our poets and priests about what it might be like were we actually to obtain it. Now, science has placed it in our grasp, and we must prepare ourselves to avoid the pitfalls that our collective wisdom of the ages has foreseen.

Why am I writing to you? As the Chief Philosophy Officer of SeNoScience, I have been given the incredible opportunity, and the terrible burden, of trying to guide the efforts of humble scientists who find themselves possessed of a power that will shake the world. We could simply sell this to the highest bidder, but surely that would not guarantee *truly* long life—for the self or for the species. Any slightest move towards lasting egomaniacal power-seeking or rapacious exploitation of natural resources would rightfully trigger revolutionary fervor from society. The ability, the drive, or the luck to amass a fortune has little to do with living the kind of life that would not threaten untenable inequality and resentment. We might therefore offer this technology to the smartest or kindest among us, but there is little agreement about how to define these traits, and there is even less certainty that they alone would support an individual in their fight against the crushing weight of a vast and uncertain personal future.

No, the simpleminded and incautious offerings of immortality that we have seen in previous examples from science fiction have led us at SeNoScience to develop a different screening methodology. We

couldn't look to prior medical trials, which only sought to cure specific ailments with specific remedies. Instead, we have had to devise a test to give more life—vast quantities of more life—to those who are best equipped to handle it. Our task then, is to find people of sound bodies *and* sound minds, for we don't want to inadvertently give someone the curse of living indefinitely with torments of insanity.

We do, however, have some practical requirements as a small, local company with limited resources and a strong desire to retain control over this process. Therefore, from all of these descriptions of our constraints, I hope you can begin to see why I am inviting *you* to participate in our revolutionary trials, and why we have limited these first attempts to current members of the Bay Area Sport and Social Club (BASSC). As the largest organization in the country that coordinates a variety of both athletic *and* communal activities, BASSC provides us at SeNoScence an excellent pool from which to find strong candidates for our program. By limiting this original trial to the current 15,000 members of BASSC, we ensure that we will not be overrun with requests from people all over the world who would surely like to apply. The bulk of your group is in their mid- to late-20's too, which perfectly coincides with the normal onset of age-related degeneration, so we will be able to prove relatively quickly that our treatments are working at keeping your bodies young. Lastly, the tests and treatments required for this trial will take place with regular frequency at our

local laboratories, so we can only deal with residents of the San Francisco Bay Area at this time.

I want to close this brief letter to you by explaining the title we have chosen for our pilot program. I hope it will help inspire you to accept our invitation to apply. Twenty-three hundred years ago, Apollonius of Rhodes wrote an epic poem about Jason and his crew who explored the Mediterranean and performed great feats of valor in their quest for the Golden Fleece. They sailed in a ship named Argos, which gave them their very literal name—*Argonauts*, or Argos Sailors. Twenty-one hundred years later, when humans began to sail the sky with hot air balloons, we coined the term *aeronautics* to describe that venture. Eighty years ago, when our species made the leap to sail among the stars, the name of choice for those who did so was obvious—*astronauts*. Now, another leap is about to be made. We are going to send humans to explore the outer reaches of life itself. The successful members of this program will sail the years of extremely long lives and show us how we can all navigate them. And so, from the Latin word for life—*vita*—we have coined a new term for this undertaking. Apply now to be a part of it. This trial will never cost you anything, and you can end your participation at any time. Use the special code below to sign up at our website and we will be in touch soon with details on how you can become one of our first *vitanauts*.

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