

Flood of Youth?  
By Lesley L. Smith

I tried to feed the world's oldest mouse some peanut butter, but he wasn't going for it. He was breathing and his whiskers were twitching but otherwise he didn't move.

"Poor Stuart," I said. I touched his head with my gloved fingertip and gently moved it down his back, carefully examining his former injuries. The nanobots I'd injected him with had knitted his broken bones together and sealed his wounds, but something else must have gone wrong.

"I'm so sorry; I thought I could save you."

I euthanized Stuart and made the initial incisions for dissection. His body was riddled with tumors. And they must have been growing for some time--which pointed to our long-term use of the nanobots.

I focused on the tiny necropsy. The nanobots had extended his life three-fold, but clearly they had some severe problems.

"I didn't mean to do this to you, Stuart."

After seeing both my parents suffer and die from cancer, the last thing I wanted to do was cause cancer in another living creature. The whole point of our nanobot project was to prolong life, not curtail it.

Gerald, my boyfriend and the lab director, stepped into the lab.

"Morning, Louisa."

I glanced up at him. "Morning, hon."

He gave me a peck on the cheek. "What's wrong?"

I pointed at the dissection tray. "Bad news. The new 'bots worked great at fixing Stuart's injuries, but it looks like the old ones gave him cancer."

He grimaced. "That is bad. Don't the new ones use some of the same algorithms as the old ones?"

"Yes," I said, grimly. "All the 'bots might have that problem."

I was not going to think about my mom, eaten alive, lying on that hospice bed.

"Tell me there's some good news," he said.

"We finally solved the problem with the self-replication process without affecting the automatic shutdown on atmospheric exposure."

I was going to remember things like mom's infectious laugh and how she loved to beat everyone at bridge.

"Good." Gerald sank down on a lab stool next to me. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, too." He grabbed my hand. "Did you hear that Category Seven hurricane took a left turn in the Gulf and is projected to make landfall at the mouth of the Mississippi?" he asked. "I just saw it on the news."

I gulped. The mouth of the Mississippi was only about fifty miles south of us. "Oh, no. It was supposed to stay in the Gulf last time I checked the weather. Not another hurricane. I'm sick of hurricanes. Hurricane Xavier barely missed us last year."

"Category Seven." Gerald shook his balding head. "I still can't get used to the new values on the scale. When I was younger and lived in New Orleans...." His face blanched. "Anyway, Louisiana's not there any more.

I tuned him out, recalling the panic last summer as millions of people tried to evacuate St. Louis at the same time. It was a nightmare.

"Louisa, I asked you a question," Gerald said.

I lifted my head. "Sorry. I missed it. What?"

"Since our life is in danger from yet another hurricane, when are you going to give in and marry me?" he asked.

I didn't want to be his wife because I didn't want to give up my independence and I was too set in my ways at this late date. "Is this really the time for this discussion? Don't we have more pressing concerns?"

I forced a grin. "I know you're cool and all, but I like things the

way they are."

"I'm so cool, I'm cold. No, wait, I'm frigid," he said playing along and smiling back at me.

I chuckled despite my best intentions. Gerald was good at cheering me up. "Right. You're absolute zero." He was so cute when he tried to use slang.

"Come on. You know you love me. And I love you. Let me show you how much." He wiggled his shaggy white eyebrows up and down.

"This is sexual harassment, you old coot." I smiled. Gerald and I had been having this same conversation, or one close to it, at least once a week for the last forty years--ever since I started here at NanoTech.

"I better get to my office. We may have to evacuate."

"Good idea, Dr. Salas," I yelled at his retreating back. "But I'm not evacuating," I said more quietly. "I have to keep an eye on the mice and the nanobots."

There was a crack of thunder as the laboratory lights flickered

A few minutes later, Gerald rushed back in. "There's a mandatory evacuation starting tomorrow afternoon. I've got to help the people in the other labs get ready. And," he considered me, "I assume I'm going to have to plead your case to the Mayor, again." He sighed. "You are so stubborn."

Seeing him again so soon put a smile on my face. "It's one of my many charms."

Gerald rushed out, shaking his head but grinning.

That didn't leave me much time. I needed to send copies of the electronic data offsite, make hard copies of vital info, check that the nanobots containment system was secure, and ensure the mice were safe. And finish the necropsy of Stuart. I got back to work.

By dinnertime, the storm was rattling the lab windows when Gerald stopped by. He looked worn out.

"Gerald, it's good to see you. I thought I might be the only one left here at NanoTech."

He mustered up a smile. "I've got good news and I've got bad news."

"Hit me with the bad news," I said slowly.

"The mayor said you and I have to evacuate like everyone else."

"That's awful," I said. "The mice will probably die if we leave them here alone. And what about the nanobots?" I paused. "What's the good news?"

"I lied," he said. "There isn't any good news." Gerald looked as unhappy as a penguin that never saw snow, which was actually all of them, these days.

I put my hands on my hips. "Well, I refuse to leave."

"I figured as much." He sighed. "I'll stay with you."

"Wait. I understand why I have to stay, but why you?"

He put his arm around me. "Someone's got to stay and take care of you while you're taking care of your lab."

"We'll have to hide out here.

Actually, it's perfect. We'll be here 24-7 to take care of things."

"What will the sleeping arrangements be?" he asked.

I decided to throw him a life preserver. "Whatever you want." I grinned.

"In that case, you talked me into it, gorgeous."

By the time the evacuation took effect, Gerald and I were ensconced in the lab, the mice were fine and we still had electricity. I made a conscious decision to try to make the best of the situation.

Once we laid down on our sleeping bags in the conference room Gerald leaned over me and started smooching. He was still a good kisser, with just the right combination of strength and gentleness. It felt good--familiar and comfortable. After a few moments he leaned back. "This reminds me of that time we went camping in Rocky Mountain National Park."

I laughed. "Do you mean back in 2012? We were practically babies back then. It was so wonderfully cool there."

"I showed you a good time, didn't I?" His voice was teasing.

I suspected Gerald's eyebrows were wiggling even though I couldn't see them in the dark. "I'll say. We barely left the tent." I reached for Gerald's hand. "We've had a lot of good times over the years."

I pecked him on the cheek and turned over to go to sleep.

Some time in the night we were awoken by the sound of a freight train as the storm flew over us.

After our fitful night, we inadvertently slept in the next morning. When we awoke, it was dark inside, dark outside, and still pouring rain.

I jerked up. "The electricity's gone out! Wake up, old man!" I said poking him as I got up.

I ran down the hall to my lab, and quickly checked on the mice and the nanobots. They were all fine. When I got back to our makeshift campground, Gerald had opened the window and was making breakfast on his camp stove.

"I think we're through the worst of it," he said.

"I'm glad to hear that," I said. "This is more like it. And if you keep up this domestic stuff, I might have to marry you after all."

He smiled and handed me a cup of coffee. "I finally figured out the way to your heart is through your stomach."

I helped Gerald wash up after breakfast in the break room near the front lobby. Thankfully we still had running water.

As I stepped over to take another dish from Gerald I slipped and fell. "Damn it!" Cold water seeped into my pants. "There's water all over the floor."

Gerald helped me up. "I didn't spill any water." He stared at the floor. "You're right though, it's wet."

He walked toward the doorway, staring at the floor. "This doesn't make any sense. It's wet over here too. And it's getting wetter."

I had a bad feeling about this. I walked over to him in the doorway. "Damn it," I said. "The hall is full of water too. Could it be leaking through the front doors?"

"There's one way to find out." Gerald strode down the hall and I followed after him.

When we got to the glass front doors, they held back at least two feet of swirling brown water. Unfortunately, a steady trickle leaked through at the bottom and there was an unpleasant odor of rotten fish. The water in the lobby rose.

"We're too close to the river!" I said.

Gerald's face turned white. "It's Hurricane Katrina all over again."

"Wait a minute," I said. "NanoTech got flooded in Hurricane Katrina way back in the oughts? Were you working on nanobots back then?"

Gerald seemed mesmerized by the straining doors holding back the floodwaters. "Yeah, early prototypes."

"Didn't that teach you anything?" I said. "Like don't relocate your business in a flood zone? Or make sure your building is at least two or three stories high?"

He tore his eyes from the door. "This wasn't a flood zone when we moved here. Part of Louisiana, and the whole state of Alabama was between us and the Gulf, not to mention all of southern Missouri. It's not my fault that's all under water now."

"What are those doors made of?" I asked. "Safety glass?"

"I'm not sure," Gerald said.

There was a loud cracking sound, and water poured into the lobby.

"Shit!" he yelled.

"We have to save the mice! C'mon!" I turned and ran down the hall, and Gerald followed me.

When we got to my lab, the water was only a few inches deep, but it was

rising. Gerald and I quickly moved the mouse cages from the bottom shelves and put them on the counters and lab tables.

My heart was pounding; I needed to calm down. "I think we're okay for a few minutes." I sat down on a lab stool. "We need to move the mice higher, though. Do you have any ideas?"

He rubbed his whiskery face. "You know, I think this building might have an attic crawl space."

I perked up. "That sounds cool. Where can we get access?"

He jerked his head toward the door. "The hall, I think."

"Show me." I stood up.

There was a trap door in the ceiling about ten feet down the hall. We scrounged up a ladder and I climbed up. The door opened easily, but I couldn't see a thing in there. "I need a flashlight."

Gerald sloshed down to our campsite and retrieved a large lantern-style flashlight and handed it up to me.

I shined the light around the space. The roof appeared to be about five feet up, there was a plywood floor, and the space was so large, I couldn't see the walls. "It looks promising," I yelled down to Gerald. "I'm going to try it out." Carefully, I knelt on the floor. It seemed fine. "So far, so good." Gingerly, I stood up and took a step. No problem. "Cold!" I yelled down through the opening. "I think this'll work."

Gerald smiled up at me. "Frigid!"

"Hold the ladder, I'm coming back down." When I stepped off the ladder onto the floor, the water was up to my knees.

We wasted no time in moving the nanobots and the cages of mice up to the attic. It still took hours and I was exhausted from climbing up and down the ladder.

I sat in the attic opening for a few moments before making the last trip, trying to catch my breath. The floodwater had been steadily rising all day and my pants were soaking wet.

Gerald appeared with another cage of mice. "I think there are only two cages left."

I sighed. "Good. I'm beat."

He very slowly climbed the ladder. When he reached the top, he started to hold out the cage but lost his balance and slipped. On the way down, his head hit a metal ladder step. He landed in the water with a huge splash.

He didn't resurface.

I raced down the ladder. "Gerald!" At the bottom, I scoured the water for him. When I found him, I dragged him upright, leaning him against the ladder. He wasn't breathing. I couldn't find a pulse. There was a nasty gash on his head.

I didn't know what to do. If only I were a doctor or a biologist, like him. I tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It didn't work. With great difficulty, I held back the tears that threatened to fall.

I had to do something. But the only thing I knew how to do was make nanobots. But I couldn't inject him with nanobots; they'd give him cancer. But I had to do something.

I bolted back up the ladder and got the nanobot container and a syringe.

He had started sliding back under the water while I was gone.

I pulled him up. "Gaia forgive me," I prayed as I injected him.

Nothing happened.

"Gerald. Come on. Breathe," I prayed. "Breathe. Breathe. Come on, Gerald. Come back to me and I'll marry you." He couldn't die, he just couldn't. It would kill me.

Suddenly he started coughing and spewing water out of his mouth. He opened his eyes. "Did I hear you say you'd marry me?"

I leaned down and hugged him fiercely as tears rolled down my cheeks.

"Yes, you old coot. I'll marry you."

He coughed again and sat up. "Frigid." He smiled weakly.

I grabbed him for a hug. "Don't you ever scare me like that again!"

We stood there for a few minutes catching our breaths.

"Gerald, I have to tell you something."

"Yes? Whatever it is, it doesn't matter now." He smiled and then said in a singsong voice, "We're getting married!"

"I had to inject you with the nanobots." I choked up. "I, I'm sorry. They saved you, but they're going to give you cancer."

I wasn't going to

think about how my dad didn't get his lung cancer diagnosis until after it had already spread to his brain, and how he died less than four weeks later.

Somehow we managed to climb up to the attic and lay down on the one blanket that hadn't gotten wet. I fell asleep immediately.

Several hours later Gerald awakened me by saying, "Louisa, are you awake?"

"Well, now I am." I leaned on an elbow. I wasn't going to think about cancer. "How do you feel? Are you all right?"

"I feel better than all right. I feel great." He leaned over and planted a sloppy kiss on my lips. "It must be because my dream is coming true."

"What, being stranded in an attic with an old woman and a bunch of mice?" I frowned in the dark.

"No." He caressed my cheek with his hand and kissed me again. His lips were warm and firm and ...insistent. "You're going to make an honest man out of me, finally."

"Oh, that."

His hand moved down my neck and chest to my breast. He squeezed it gently.

I gasped. It felt great. "You must be feeling good."

"No. You feel good, Mrs. Salas." He shifted his weight and lay on top of me, covering my face in kisses, as his hands found my breasts.

And then I felt something I hadn't felt in over a decade. "Gerald! I can't believe you. We're stranded, in danger for our lives, and you managed to pop one of those pills?"

"No," he said nuzzling my neck and unbuttoning my blouse.

And then I felt something else I hadn't felt in a decade--I wanted him, no needed him, to keep going. I started unbuttoning his shirt. "Maybe I should have agreed to this marriage thing a long time ago."

"That's absolute zero."

When I woke up the next morning, I checked on the mice right away. They seemed fine.

Back in our sleeping area, Gerald had turned on the lantern and was grinning at me like the polar bear that found the glacier. "Morning, Mrs. Salas. You look beautiful."

He looked handsome in the dim light. Too handsome. The nanobots had definitely been hard at work, repairing minor injuries due to aging. "Gerald, honey, I'm so sorry I had to inject you with the nanobots."

"Well, I'm not sorry. I've never felt better." He smiled gently at me. "I understand you had to do it to save my life. Besides, I think you'll figure out the bug in the 'bots once you turn your mind to it."

I hoped he was right.

We had to wait three more days for the floodwater to go down and the evacuation order to be lifted. Our clothes dried out after a while, but somehow we didn't manage to put them back on until we heard voices in the hall below us.

"Is anyone here?"

Through the doorway, I spied two young men in uniforms down in the

hallway. "Yes. We're here. Just a minute." I searched frantically for my shirt. "Get dressed, Gerald," I hissed.

"Are you all right up there? Should we come up?"

"No!" I fumbled with the buttons on my blouse. "We're fine. Don't come up," I said. "We'll be right down." I finished dressing and climbed down the ladder.

"You people were supposed to evacuate. Are you Dr. Salas?" one of the officers asked me as I reached the floor.

"No. I'm Dr. Johnson."

The other officer was scowling and scrolling through his e-board. "Stupid paperwork. This isn't right."

"I'm Salas," Gerald said, coming down the ladder.

"The paperwork says these guys are supposed to be in their seventies." The officer with the e-board shook his head.

The first officer said, "Who cares? It's just another dumb paperwork mistake. Are you guys okay?" He glanced at the muck and mud in the hallway.

"We're fine," I said. "Thank you for checking on us."

"Yes, thanks a lot." Coming up behind me, Gerald put his hand on my shoulder. "We'll deal with the building situation."

"Okay then. We'll be going." The officers went back down the hall.

"I vote that we rebuild somewhere high and cool--like in the Rocky Mountains." I turned around to face Gerald.

He gasped. "You look younger!"

"Oh, no! I must have gotten contaminated with the nanobots!" I studied my wrinkle-free hands in the sunlight--they looked amazing.

They meant my worst nightmare was going to come true: cancer.

Gerald gave a little jump. "Do I look as good as you? I had no idea!" He turned and ran down the hall. "I have to see what I look like!" He ran into the Men's Room.

I ran after him, right up to the mirror. Wow. I hadn't looked this good in forty years.

"We created the fountain of youth!" he said.

"Yes, but at what price?" I said.

"Hey, wait a minute. You can't come in the Men's Room," he said.

Over the next couple days, we got an emergency occupancy permit from the city along with a big fine for not evacuating.

Immediately, I got to work re-engineering the nanobots. We had lost all the old nanobots in the flood, but we still had some inside the lab mice. And inside Gerald and me apparently.

The last thing I wanted was to have given the love of my life cancer. I had to engineer some new 'bots to kill the tumors.

I was hard at work in the lab one evening, when Gerald stopped by. "It's dinner time. Were you planning on eating?"

I glanced up at him. "Maybe not. I've to lick this cancer problem."

"C'mon, Louisa, you can't lick anything if you're worn out. And...." He wiggled his eyebrows. "That would be a shame because I've got lots of parts that need licking."

"Gerald, you don't understand. The nanobots--."

He frowned. "I do understand. I understand that Stuart lived the equivalent of three lifetimes before he got cancer. I can live with that; so can you--for two hundred and fifty years. Come to dinner with me."

Reluctantly, I agreed. Outside the lab, things were returning to normal. At least traffic was, since we managed to get stuck in it. In the car, I flipped on the holonet.

The holocaster said, "Scientists are baffled: hundreds of survivors of Hurricane Yolanda seem to be getting younger. The calling it the Flood of

Youth." She flipped her hair. "I wouldn't mind experiencing a flood like that," she said to the holocaster sitting next to her.

"Me, either." He chuckled.

"Turn around, Gerald!" I said. "We have to get back to the lab!"

"You're concerned about that story?" he said. "That can't be our nanobots. They have built in fail-safes, right?"

"Yes." I took a deep breath. "But it can't be a coincidence."

What happened? My mind raced, until the conclusion hit me over the head.

"I didn't think of this before, but the nanobots that escaped in the flood weren't in the atmosphere, they were in water." I took another breath.

"We have to get back to lab."

"Yes. Gaia, save us," he whispered, turning the car around.

I had another horrible thought.

"Gerald," I said. "Did you ever wonder what happened to the nanobots you lost in Hurricane Katrina?"

The blood drained from his face. "Now I do."

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