**The Fountain of Youth on Jasper**

Eric Rasmussen

On the morning news, a reporter interviews 106-year-old Mary about her secret to long life. My daughter and I watch from opposite ends of the couch.

“Wendy’s, every day,” the old woman says.

The reporter straightens up beside Mary’s wheelchair, faces the camera. “Fast food may not be the solution for everyone, but it sure has worked for Mary.”

Mary gestures for the microphone. “The one on Jasper.”

“I’m sorry?” the reporter asks.

“Not the one by the interstate. The one on Jasper.”

Normally I tune out local news fluff, but I recently proofread the surprisingly extensive four-page paper on *fountains of youth* my daughter wrote for school.

“Did you hear that?” I ask. “This is your area of expertise.”

“Are you talking about the paper *again*?” My daughter, Destiny, doesn’t look up from her phone. “That was five months ago.”

*For thousands of years, humans have sought magical ways to stay young, from pools to fountains, sacred peaches to ambrosia from the gods.* Then Destiny’s paper pointed out that modern folks are still on the same quest, just with creams and therapies. Brilliant.

I only get to see her once a month. Mostly we just sit around. “We should go.”

“Where?”

“To Mary’s Wendy’s.” The news moves on to baseball scores and I look up it up. There’s no Jasper Street in our city. There are Wendy’s *in* the cities of Jasper in Indiana, Alabama, Florida, and Georgia, but I can’t find a Wendy’s *on* Jasper anywhere in the country.

*Ponce de Leon was real, but few modern historians believe he was searching for the fountain of youth.* But maybe he did find something after all. Why else would old people love Florida so much?

(Destiny made that connection, not me.)

“I can’t find it,” I say.

“It’s somewhere by Madison” Destiny replies.

“How do you know that?”

“The reporter said so, at the beginning of the story.”

“I’ll meet you in the car,” I say, then hobble out of the room before she has a chance to object.

While I wait behind the steering wheel, I catalog what I miss most about being young: hair, eating however much I want, staring at a person I barely recognized in the mirror at the end of each day. Finally, Destiny appears in the garage doorway. “You’re not serious. Madison is three hours away.”

This is a huge gamble. She’ll likely turn back inside. “You have other plans?”

Big pause. Then, she sighs and joins me in the car. I back into the street and squeal the tires (accidentally) as we depart. When I stop for gas, I buy us each a chocolate milk.

*Four thousand years ago, Gilgamesh sought immortality help from a man named Utnapishtim, who directed the king to retrieve a plant from the bottom of the sea.* Also, Japanese people eat a lot of seaweed, and they have some of the longest life spans on earth. Coincidence?

The first Wendy’s we find is right off the interstate. Destiny waits in the car. After using the bathroom I ask to see the manager, who has long stringy hair and an eye patch; her voice croaks like a frog. “How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for a Wendy’s,” I say. “But not this one. The one on Jasper.”

“There’s no such thing,” the manager says.

“Damn.” It’s 11:00 AM, and the employees behind the counter with nothing to do stare off like marble statues. “Thanks anyway.”

“Wait,” snaps the manager, scanning the restaurant and suddenly lowering her voice, “I know what you seek. It’s not on any map.” She leans in close, then points with her talon-like finger. “Waunakee.”

I nod. “Is that some sort of password?”

“A suburb. Twenty minutes north.”

*Taoist alchemists used mercury in their elixirs of life, which were meant to grant immortality. By seeking to extend life, they shortened it considerably.* I told Destiny to expand that paragraph, because there has to be some sort of lesson there. She took my advice.

Waunakee’s nice, but after driving around for an hour, we can’t find anything. We’ve run out of things to talk about. The truth has grown painfully clear: this trip was a huge waste of time.

As I’m trying to find the highway I miss a stop sign, and not ten seconds later red and blue lights flash in my rearview mirror. Destiny lays her head on the dashboard, I pull over, and the police officer approaches. He’s a sight to behold—shockingly tall, blond, electric blue eyes, face like a god. He grabs my license.

“What brings you to Waunakee?” he asks.

“It’s stupid.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“We’re trying to find a certain Wendy’s.”

“Why?”

“It’s not for me. It’s for her.” I point at Destiny. “She wrote a paper.”

I’m lying, and the officer probably knows it. I’m really here for me. The funny thing about that paper is that I never thought about staying young until I read it and realized that growing old is all I think about, all the time.

The cop stands tall. “Three blocks ahead, take a right.” He hands my license back. “It’s a special place. Best keep it to yourself. And watch for stop signs, okay?”

The restaurant is not like I imagined. It’s old. They still have a Super Bar and sunroom seating with curved glass like a greenhouse.

“Welcome to Wendy’s.” The girl behind the counter looks too young for a fast-food job. Maybe that means we’re in the right place. “What can I get for you?”

“I don’t know.” I scan the big menu overhead, then turn to my daughter. “What do you want?”

“Chicken sandwich.”

“Two chicken sandwiches, please.”

We enjoy our lunch in one of the booths. “Can you feel it working?” I ask Destiny when we finish. She offers a smirk, which might mean “yes,” or it might mean she thinks I’m an idiot. I can’t tell which. Maybe both.