

Walk Your Age

By Matt Cook

“The first person to live to be 1,000 years old is alive today.” – Aubrey de Grey, 2018

Long before Descartes’ smog-poisoned visions of modernity, ancient Mesopotamian bureaucrats had already anointed *length* and *area* as the core principles of civilization. How else could their kings measure fertile land and extract taxes? But while bushels of grain could ensure the long life of a kingdom, a farmer’s footsteps had only ever *depreciated* the body that walked them. Now it’s the farmer’s time.

In 2035, scientists confirmed that enough footsteps against fixed terrain lengthened telomeres, the genetic caps that tell a cell when to stop multiplying (i.e., when to die). You could simulate the necessary biomechanics with a treadmill and a widescreen, but virtual walkers had to walk approximately 30% more steps to ensure healthy, lasting cells. An interesting discovery, but worse than useless information for the very old, who struggled walk their age, let alone the age of one much older. Perhaps that’s why it took so long for the end of humanity to begin; those that could still traverse great distances at advanced ages were often in gyms or in swimming pools, not in the fields like their ancestors. Easier on the joints.

An English-language obituary, printed in Beaumont, Texas – not an asteroid, a plague, or AI – triggered the end of the world. A woman there had just died, aged 135. This beat the previous world

record by a decade. Sheila Godfrey was locally famous for her daily walk. She was cheered on by her Little Rock neighbors as she passed by the golden arches on Route 201 in the morning and greeted with sweetened iced tea by her rest home compatriots in the early afternoon. At the end of her life, Sheila barely walked a mile a day, but, when asked about the secret to her longevity, she said made a curious remark: “I walked my age. Every year after I turned 100. I walked my age.”

Sheila’s age when she died made the news as did her curious method, which was published in syndication worldwide. Soon after, a loose-knit cohort of centenarians was dedicated to geriatric perambulation. They were under no illusions. Walking was not then seen as an esoteric ritual or miracle cure. Early participants saw the nascent “walk-off” as a social bonding opportunity and a reason, not a means, to keep on living. Soon, there were *thousands* of 135-year-olds. Then there were millions. Then 90-year-olds joined the walk-off. When “walking age” and government sanctioned retirement ages converged, moving in the opposite directions, society began to break down.

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One man, a Colonel H.R. Coolidge, barricaded himself inside a fortified compound in the scrub brush desert west of Los Angeles and set about to outlive everyone. The Colonel was very rich had planned it all out in exacting detail. First, there was the matter of getting in his steps, thereby staving off a non-accidental death. A treadmill wasn’t enough for such ambitious walkers, ones who had designs to surpass 200 years. But, with a clear view of the wide, desert horizon, he could survive on a relatively short daily walk. Before beginning his morning steps, The Colonel would strap on his noise canceling headphones and blast death metal and scowling at the horizon, blood boiling, fists and jawline clenched.

A woman, half a world away, had no idea that people were trying to live forever. In fact, she rarely saw another soul, having inherited a small cabin in the middle of an old growth forest, grandfathered real estate with no legal easements. Greenbough was only trying to surf. When she wasn’t atop the water, she gathered it from streams to drink or fished from it to eat. A few steps from the beach, a lush forest provided wild greens and berries to supplement the briny fish and seaweed soups. Everything else was surfing. Occasionally, intrepid bums would make it far enough up the rugged coastline north of

Tofino and happen across a discarded fish carcass or still-warm campfire, but Greenbough herself remained a ghost. She had a transistor radio and knew the way to town but cared little for humanity.

By 2050, broadcast signals stopped transmitting and landlines stopped ringing. Then it was the faucets and the light switches that ceased to function, things closer at hand. The Colonel wasn't bothered; his iPhone was solar charged and the cisterns were full on the desert property after the particularly wet 2080s. nutrient dense MREs lined every basement wall, insulating home and body alike.

By the year 2100, when the Colonel lost track of his final CB "radio buddy" (good riddance), Greenbough's life was fully optimized. Offshore drilling had ceased in the Pacific, and there were no more coal plants in operation. Fish and shellfish were plentiful just offshore. Small game was tame and easy to trap. Hill-sized blueberries patches carried fruit the size of plumbs and it was only the bear population that Greenbough had to contend with. She did so gracefully. The surf was good too. The miles and the years were easy. Yet, by the age of 150, both The Colonel and Greenbough grew restless.

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It didn't take long for them to meet, the last two humans on Earth. Greenbough had been paddleboarding rather than longboarding since her 175th year, allowing her to journey further and further south, chasing waves and schools of fish. Dipping and pulling motions were similar enough to walking that she was able to rejuvenate on the water. When she passed the ruins of the Golden Gate Bridge, an engineering feat she had never known, Greenbough began to paddle inland to find fresh water. Her means of sustenance included a rod and a line, and she could fashion a hook from anything, bait it with elaborately braided hair and fingernail flies, and reel in a week of protein in an hour. On her hip, Greenbough wore a fillet knife, which she had never drawn in anger or considered wielding against a living creature.

The Colonel was making his way north. Unlike Greenbough, who had filled a hemp mesh sling with fresh fruit and dried fish, he was outfitted in full tactical ensemble. Besides a framed pack and plate vest, there were the three mags for the scoped .308 rifle he had strapped across his chest. Lower, on a wide belt, The Colonel kept a 1911 sidearm holstered and a long, serrated blade. Two frag grenades in back helped to "balance the load" as he followed the last remnants of Interstate 5 North, towards what he

assumed were milder summers, and, perhaps, to abandoned stores of those carbohydrate rich MREs that he had come to favor.

But deep in a tidal marsh south of Fremont, neither would get their steps. Greenbough couldn't get a paddle beneath the surface of the water, so dense were the salt grasses. The Colonel's boots were soddened, his rifle heavy. They were unarmed except for their blades when they finally met, having shed any excess weight to continue moving forward. They took their last steps less than 10 yards apart, Greenbough still on her board, The Colonel ankle deep in murky water. From the outset, The Colonel wanted to kill Greenbough, as his training, his mindset, and his darkened soul had instructed him. Any other human would have appeared to him as a threat. Greenbough recognized the look, the same she had sensed when brown bears returned to the island, shortly after Vancouver went dark, or when a lion made its way up from the high Sierras to the mainland and began taking feral goats, but she wasn't afraid.

So sensitive were these last humans to their environment that the flickering of a tadpole tail in the saline marsh would have awoken either of them, so, even though they both dozed intermittently, neither took a single step forward nor indulged in a morsel to eat until past dawn the following morning. They may have well have been in opposing trenches, in France, during a Great War ceasefire, so firm were their positions. Greenbough ate first, taking a handful of ripe berries from her sack at lunchtime on the second day of their encounter. The Colonel indulged in an expired *Slim Jim* soon after, glaring at the woman crouched on a longboard a few steps away. On the third day, they finally spoke.

"What's your name?", growled The Colonel. Greenbough was so tanned from a life on the water that he took her for a south pacific islander, and he didn't expect she could answer in English, if she could speak at all. There were no other creatures on Earth who spoke their language, or any human language, and neither had held a conversation in 50 years, except occasionally with themselves.

"Greenbough."

She could growl too, but she spoke smoothly, without a hitch. The berries had energized her, and she planned on half a whitefish fillet for dinner. Greenbough wasn't worried.

"How long?...", he trailed off, finally averting his murderous gaze. She knew what he meant.

“Soon, I’ll be as old as the trees on the beach. When I’m as old as the trees on the mountain, then I’ll be done.”

Done with what?, the Colonel asked himself, shivering, crouched in amongst those serrated leafstems, mind failing, even as his body persisted on the steps gained from his long march north.

The Colonel was worried. And cold. His victuals, such as they were, worked fine for desert jaunts, but not for sustained activity in a damp microclimate. He was tempted to sit down, in the water, but had walked so many steps over so many years that he was able to remain standing, nonstop, for days, alternatively microsleping and startling awake, his hand gripping the blade handle. At midday, he would see Greenbough looking at him. Same in the morning. Even at midnight, when the $\frac{3}{4}$ moon hit her face, she appeared to be awake and staring. The Colonel’s position was untenable. He made a move.

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At dusk on the 4th day, the Colonel began inching forward. Progress was painful, and his centuries-old muscles clung cold to bent and weathered bone, but he was meticulous as always. A rigid silhouette faced him, as it had the night before. Just before dawn, he was within striking distance of his target. Drawing his blade, he focused on his basic training from the times with countries from centuries before. The Colonel thrust the knife point forward, underhand, shredding fabric but not flesh.

Greenbough had fashioned a decoy. From her paddle, set upright in a groove that she used to hoist her shirt as a sail in fine weather, she had crafted a shadow form before slipping into the water as silently as the Harbor Seals she had surfed alongside off Point Reyes. She had crawled and then rose and then cut the Colonel’s throat without hesitation, as he would hers, and he fell, all 273 years of him, bleeding out or drowning or both in 4 inches of silty water near where they used to make electric cars.