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A love machine.
Dangerous. Can kill
when aroused. Use
carefully, at your own
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We died in droves ~
mouths open, miming
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Wraiths in the dark.

Flash Fiction

Ronald Waits

by Robert John Miller © 2010

★ 1st Paid Publication

It was 2084 and Ronald was standing in line in a restaurant in an Omega Store, waiting to order a cheeseburger. He was nearly 100 but, thanks to a specially-issued government license awarded to "essential" experts-in-their-fields, was far from death: he was eligible for weekly shots of *Restore*, a drug that not only inhibited cell death but actually sped-up cell restoration. Short of a clogged artery or blunt-force trauma, Ronald was one of the world's first living immortals, kept alive one week at a time.

The medical community—the very same people who vow to keep others alive and who actually developed *Restore* in the first place, albeit somewhat accidentally, not unlike Penicillin—as actually the first group to come forward seeking a ban on its use. It was argued that, until resource management and infrastructure could catch up with the fruits of medical science, forcing cells to live beyond their natural life-spans was actually a step closer to death for the species. If people generally stopped dying, then we were all finished.

University Philosophy Departments, too, took newfound interest in the moral question of "killing" versus "letting die." Older professors, hanging on for just a few more years to finish their life's works, argued one way; graduate students, eyeing the opening of tenure-track positions, predictably argued another. So it goes.

The cheeseburger that Ronald was waiting for was not, oddly enough, a *cheese* burger at all. Though the "cheese" tasted real, it was actually just processed protein; cattle, including dairy cows, were heavily taxed after it was understood their enormous appetites and general flatulence were a large contribution to the planet's nouveau weather patterns. So, too, Ronald was not actually waiting for a "burger": the meat was grown in sheets in a lab and electrically exercised, freeze-dried, and shipped out. The lettuce and tomato were real in every sense, but no longer grown in the soil: in the newly expanding deserts of the American West, solar- and wind-powered greenhouse skyscrapers jutted out of the landscape, filled with vegetables swimming in nutrient-enriched water pumped from ancient aquifers. The bun, though, was made from wheat grown the old-fashioned way. It was genetically modified to have a smoky, honey flavor.

Ronald was on the government's "essential personnel" list because he was an intelligence expert, and with nearly 70 years of experience in the field, he knew more about the most obscure trivia than an "average" person might ever know about anything in his entire life.

Ronald was, in fact, the man who coined the term "World War III," which the talking heads on the television were currently discussing.

"WW3" didn't refer so much to a specific war as it referred simply to the state that the world was in now—a lot of very small wars in very small places, often about very small things, almost always unrelated to each other aside from the way all wars are related, and rarely executed with any clear objectives. The older gentleman standing in line behind Ronald, watching video of explosions in a part of the world he didn't recognize, muttered something about how "some of these kids now grewed up all in the middle of it, it's all they know now, ain't got nothin' to do with them but there ain't no other way for them."

Ronald nodded, as if interested, but was more concerned with the progress of his cheeseburger.

The next news item was something about the ongoing *Restore* debate, someone picketing somewhere to stop its use, someone picketing somewhere else to secure his own lifetime supply, someone somewhere else proposing a sterilization-for-*Restore* exchange to cap the population growth of the "developing world."



The older gentleman behind Ronald said something about how he wished he could have just a few doses, just enough so he could travel some before he couldn't.

"There isn't a thing in this world that can't be made to sound seductive," Ronald said. "Even suicide, an act that precludes its actor from witnessing the results, has seduced many a lonesome fellow with false promises of redemption."

With that statement Ronald noted it was well beyond his usual dinner time of 4:45 and shouted with the grumpiness only allowed to old men, "Where the fuck is my cheeseburger?"