

## **Eternity-Therapy Inc.**

**By Alex Clark-McGlenn**

Eternity-Therapy Inc. has over 5000 successful patients, one of whom is Gene Erikson. For 13 years Gene has not aged one day. His mind is as sharp as the day he walked into that sterile, white-washed room. He remembers taking a seat on the doctor's examination table and shuddering as he often does when nervous. After what seemed like an eternity the doctor had come in.

“Ooookay, how are we doing today Mr...Erikson?” he asked, with a quick smile.

“Good,” Gene answered, timidly.

“There's no need to be frightened, Mr. Erikson. It's only a shot... is it cold in here? You seem to be shivering horribly.”

“Oh, no, I get like this some...sometimes,” his voice sounded shrill and stretched to him, as though coming from the end of a great tunnel.

“My name is Dr. Philips. I assume you have read and signed the paper work?”

Gene nodded the affirmative.

“Good, good. Now I'm supposed to tell you a little about this shot we've developed here. The virus we will be submitting you to is programmed to seek out the aging gene, also known as EG-314 and completely disable it. However, the Eternity Shot has produced severe side effects in a select group of people, our researchers are still unable to find the pattern that link these cases. There must be no doubt that you are the one making the choice to proceed with the operation.”

“Yes doctor, I've already decided,” Said Gene.

“In that case,” the doctor held out a release form, “sign this.”

It is almost 11:30 and he feels guilty when he spends half the day in bed, though if not for this guilt, he would undoubtedly spend all day wrapped in his comforter watching snowflakes, caught in the wind, fly past his apartment window.

He crawls out from beneath the covers, slipping on some cotton pajama bottoms he got at Costco- 3 pairs for \$30.00. His New York apartment has white walls and white floors and the furniture Gene brought when he moved in is white. He has done little to decorate. The only personalized aspect of his house is the certificate he hung above the mantle, which declared “Gene M. Erikson, patient 3054 has now Reached Eternity.”

Gene walks down the small hallway to the bathroom. Takes his early morning piss, brushes his teeth and washes his face. From the look of him, it appears he is, perhaps 35 at most. With his smooth toned face, short cut sandy hair. But his eyes are barren, void of emotion, the same amount personality might be found in fish eyes. His nose is long and crooked as if it has been broken at least once. He walks into the kitchen to make some breakfast. Gene can already feel the gnaw in his temples like minute pieces of earth starting to tremble before the quake.

He grabs the small black remote and flicks on the TV that sits on top of the fridge and thumbs through a couple channels. The one thing Gene prides himself on is being informed. For no other purpose than keeping up with his mother who badgers him if he isn't up on current events. Whether it is the Anti-matter debates or Exxon mobile's most recent failure to counteract the sales of Tesla Motor's electric car, Gene is always there to hear about it. Channel 5 is his preference, but he has missed that by a couple hours so he is forced to listen to the guy on CNN. He then pours himself a bowl of Wheaties, which have been his favorite since he was a kid, and takes his seat at the table. From time to time he looks up at the TV to catch a couple words from around the world. He is glad to hear, China's overwhelming economy is predicting a jump in overall production.

Gene turns the channel to a domestic station, something a little closer to home.

“For twenty-five years Eternity-Therapy Inc. has been promoting and using, on paying customers only, the Eternity shot, otherwise known as the Geno-virus which deactivates EG-314, the aging gene.

“Reports are just now coming in that an extremist organization known as Natural Life has taken responsibility for the first terrorist attack against Eternity-Therapy Inc.

Early this morning, in our nation's capital, an Eternity House was bombed by said organization leaving 14 dead and 21 injured.”

Gene can not wrap his head around the concept. Why is the elimination of age such a horrible thing? He has not aged in 13 years, and isn't he happier now? The business of terrorism from within the United States seems too grim a thing to think about over breakfast.

Gene eats the rest of his Wheaties in silence, drinking the milk at the bottom of the bowl before washing it out and sliding it through the auto-dryer next to the sink. It crosses his mind to walk to the park and grab a cup of coffee. He puts on some proper clothes and straps on the boots he wears when the weather isn't warm and sunny. He proceeds out of his apartment, locking the door behind him and walks down the hall to the elevator.

Inside the elevator he wonders about the terrorist attack on his most valuable stock, the company that has made him rich, and immortal. He wonders if that organization, Natural Life has found records of the people who are now ageless. What if these extremists find out he is a large supporter of Eternity-Therapy Inc. What if they have records of where he lives?

Gene is still shuddering when the elevator doors slide open. A blast of cool air assails him from the lobby. He feels a quick pang in his frontal lobe, a shifting land mass lodged in his head. The double doors to the apartment complex are being held open by an old man who is struggling with a large suitcase. Gene crosses the lobby and asks the man if he needs help.

“I wish I had you around all the time. I remember when I was in my thirties, had not a care in the world” says the old man, “thank you so much.”

“Not at all,” he replies, before stepping out into the frigid winter air, happy to have youth on his side.

The snow is being buffeted into the large buildings by sudden gusts of wind. The few people on the streets look as if they have horrible dandruff. The gusts of wind rise up from time to time, battering Gene as he makes his way to Central Park. It is a short walk,

one that he makes often, yet he can't help but look over his shoulder furtively from time to time. The midday news has severely rattled his sense of security. He rubs his temples trying to massage the hurt right out of his head. He begins to shudder. The frigid wind blowing cold air down his throat.

He is almost to the park but when he sees Starbucks is closed, he begins to think it was a bad idea to go for this stroll. But the beating in his head tells him otherwise and he feels the raw air would help the pounding in his skull. The headaches have been happening more and more frequently. Migraines of some sort, he supposes. Though he has no idea what is causing them.

He begins to notice empty streets as he walks, many of the store fronts are dark. Even though the snow is deep this day, it seems strange that there are so few people. And when he arrives at the park there is absolutely not a soul in sight. He sits himself down on a bench and tries to relax. He can't shake the unease from his head. His thoughts are muddled with terrorist attacks, what they might be planning next, and how he could be targeted. The more he contemplates these terrifying ideas the more he feels the pressure in his head building. He is considering going back to his apartment, to his medicine cabinet, when he hears his cell phone playing its jingle.

He flips open the phone, "Hello."

"What," says a woman's voice, "aren't you going to greet me with a Merry Christmas?"

"What? Mom, is that you?"

"Gene," she says, "You've forgotten again haven't you?"

Gene tries to think but it makes his head hurt. He shifts uncomfortably on the bench.

"It's your birthday today, remember, and you're forty-nine years old. Or is it forty-eight," his mother sounds exasperated, even through the small wireless.

"Forty-nine, I guess," he fidgets with the buttons of his coat. "Sorry mom, I was distracted. Have you seen the news today? An Eternity house was bombed last night, this country is going mad."

“It’s Christmas and your birthday, Gene. Don’t worry about things like that today. Speaking of which, didn’t you get my package and card? I sent it a while ago. Thought it would be there by now, I must say.”

“Thanks Mom, but I’m really freaked out. What if these terrorists can get to me?” Gene said, and a grimace crossed his face.

“I tell ya, Gene, you’re more paranoid than a rabbit in a fox den. You didn’t use to be like this. You never use to forget your birthdays and Christmas either, until...”

“I got the eternity shot, I know, mom. But I won’t be complaining when I’m a-hundred and thirty and feel like I’m thirty-six. Speaking of which, all this stress is giving me another one of those headaches, can I call you back in an hour or two?”

“Sure Gene, just don’t forget. And I’ve been telling you for a year now, you should go to a doctor and ask about your headaches.”

“Yeah, I think I will. I’ll call the doctor tomorrow. These aches are becoming unbearable. But really Mom, I need to go.” He hangs up.

Gene rose, sliding the cell phone into his jacket pocket. He sets off at a brisk walk trying to concentrate on anything but the blaring pain inside his head. The sensation of the small cracks inside his mind has now grown to a 6.9 on the seismograph. The walk back takes hardly any time at all, though it seemed to take hours. The pain is spreading to his eyes and he tries hard to stop them from watering. When he finally makes it to his medicine cabinet, silent tears are streaming down his face.

He gobbles the Extra Strength Advil down like a starving man sitting at a royal banquet and follows the pills with three glasses of water. Maybe it is his imagination but the water has a metallic taste and it crosses his mind that the terrorists have put something in it. He spends the rest of the day at the kitchen table flipping through the channels on his TV, not really seeing any of it, only using the brief images to distract himself from the pain.

The next day Gene wakes at his kitchen table. His head feels completely normal. Void of pain. Then he remembers the silent tears rolling down his face as he looked in the mirror. Then he remembers the news cast from yesterday, and begins to shudder.

Gene makes himself breakfast. Eggs, Over-Easies—he sets the autostove and waits, thinking. After breakfast he decides to wait until noon before calling his doctor and spends the three hours doing something he has not done for years. He digs his way through the extra room filled with boxes like a terrier digging out a rat or shrew. He knows it is in here somewhere. Finally he finds the old record player his father had given him more than 30 years ago. Finally, in the far corner, all hastily jammed into a couple boxes the player and records wait. He hustles them out of the room and sets them down near the sound jack in the wall. Speakers are wired throughout the apartment. He plugs the record player in to both the wall and the speaker jack. The green light blinks as he pushes the button. He flips through the box of records, taking care to look at his old favorites. Kiss, The Almond Brothers and Louis Armstrong. He slides the record out of its case. The tune begins and Gene can't help but feel at ease, letting his back rest against the living room chair.

*I see trees of green, red roses too,  
I see them bloom for me and you,  
and I think to myself what a wonderful world.*

Louis Armstrong's voice blares throughout the house. His crackling voice reminds Gene of the electrical feeling just before a thunder storm in New Jersey.

*I see skies of blue and clouds of white  
the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night  
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.*

Gene stares out the window, listening to that crackly voice. A broad smile inching across his face as the song carries on. For the first time in 13 years Gene is smiling with genuine mirth. His mind, a void, where dark thoughts of terrorism no longer control his actions. For the first time in longer than Gene can recall the path of death doesn't seem like such a terrifying journey.

And then the song fades, and Gene is left with silence. His paranoia, his insecurities, his fear of the unknown, of death all comes rushing back to him as one.

12 o'clock, on the dot. Gene holds the phone in his hand and dials the doctor's number. He feels a great whoosh of relief as the doctor's voice answers the other line.

"Hello this is Greg Philips speaking."

"Dr. Philips, its Gene Erikson."

"Oh, well Hello, Gene. I wasn't expecting any calls, it's the holidays."

"Ya, I know doc, I'm sorry but I had one hell of a headache yesterday and was wondering if you could help me out."

"My goodness, it's the holidays Gene, I..."

Gene cuts him off, "I have money, I'm sure we can work something out."

"Oh well, I guess I could run a CAT or MRI scan on you, though it will likely yield the same results as your last MRI. It was what, five years ago now? But since you don't age any longer it will look very similar if not the same."

"I still want it done doc. I'm afraid there may be something in the water. I'm sure you've heard about that terrorist attack on the Eternity house. Well maybe they got to me also."

"Well I don't know about that Gene. I would think its more of your *condition*, I mean, you are still like a walking experiment. Why don't you come in tomorrow some time, let's say three?"

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Gene Erikson is feeling very optimistic as he steps out of the glacial weather and into the tangy-sweet smelling building where Dr. Philips holds his practice. He had spent the rest of the previous day listening to old records, recalling the days of his youth—his real youth.

Dr. Philips' room is on the third floor, last door on the left.

"Hello, hello," says the doctor, as Gene enters.

"Thanks for this doc."

Dr. Philips nods, leading the way into the back room where the MRI machine is.

Gene has had an MRI before, almost 5 years previous. He climbs onto the table that slides into the cylindrical tube.

“Remember,” says the doctor, “don’t move or we’ll have to start over again.”

Gene nods and lies down, trying to make himself comfortable enough. As the machine starts, he can hear the electric buzz. The darkness is so impenetrable he can’t tell when his eyes are open or closed. He focuses on being still, unmovable like a hunk of earth. At the same time, thoughts of death and terrorism creep into his mind like an unruly creature, only content with the fear it may cause in others.

The humming seems to continue forever, accompanied by great rattling sounds like a train in the distance. After about thirty minutes the buzzing subsides.

“You can move now, if you wish,” says the doctor’s voice from out of sight.

Gene twists his head to the left, feeling the popping sensation he has enjoyed since he was a kid, then to the right.

He can hear the doctor walking over to his computer where the images will appear in a couple minutes. He slides his legs to the side and hops off the table once it is out of the cylinder.

“Well doc, what d’we got?” he asks, feeling quite cheerful.

The doctor doesn’t answer. He is staring at the screen, brow furrowed, creased with confusion. Gene crosses the room and goes around to the other side of the desk to catch a glance. What he sees doesn’t mean much to him. He is no expert and doesn’t notice anything out of the ordinary.

“Well doc, what’s the diagnosis?” he asks.

Dr. Philips murmurs something so quiet Gene isn’t able to hear.

“What?” Gene begins but is cut off.

“You have brain cancer, Mr. Erikson. From the look of it, severe. I believe the only reason you have not shown symptoms is because you believed yourself to be in perfect health.”



Gene can't believe what he is hearing, can't process it. It is so ridiculous to him, he begins to laugh, and as he does so, he feels, for the second time in two days the moist warmth of tears slide down his cheeks. This time however, they are not because of pain.