



Forever and a Life – Daniel Roy

📁 [SCIENCE FICTION / STORY](#) 📅 12 APRIL 2019



Transcripts of Mayfly interviews by Dr. Leanne Jansen.

Sarah al-Awqati (childhood friend): “Fuck forever.” Yup, I was right in front of the stage when she first said that. I can say “she,” right?

Interviewer: Sure, if you like.

Al-Awqati: She was smoking a cig on stage when she said it. Ever seen those? Little paper sticks that smelled like burnt grass. Anyway: [Al-Awqati inhales an imaginary cig, then exhales invisible smoke as she speaks.] “Fuck forever.” Like that.

Esra Agnarsson (Mayfly survivor): You asked if Sylvia Castro believed it. Look, there’s no denying that a few of us thought it was an act, but me... Castro was so much larger than life, y’know? I could tell she meant it. She wanted to punch immortality in the balls.

Interviewer: Do you think she acted out of anger against the Autocracy?

Agnarsson: What? Oh, no no no. Of course not.



April 2019



Recorded at the Olivia Castro Center of the Arts on the fiftieth anniversary of Sylvia Castro's death.

[Polite applause.]

Olivia Castro: Freedom. That's what my grandson wanted, not just for himself but for each and every one of us. The freedom to *choose* to be immortal, to embrace this great gift that the Autocracy, praise be, has made possible.

Now, you might wonder who in their right mind would choose *not* to live forever. That's okay, I do too, sometimes. [Laughter.] It's tempting to look down on those poor souls who would rather live short, brutish lives than shine like a beacon through the ages with us. Some historians look back on the life of Sylvain Castro and find all sorts of pathologies and mental defects that led him down this path.

But I know my grandson. I bounced him on my lap when he was just a little boy. Whatever mental state led him to reject immortality, it doesn't diminish the importance of his grand idea. It doesn't negate the significance of his contribution.

Each of us here is alive because we *want* it. The Autocracy is our *choice*. This is our freedom, and we have Sylvain Castro to thank for reminding us. Thank you, Sylvain. And praise the Autocracy for keeping us safe through the centuries to come!

[Sustained applause.]



[Wang Xian-zhi frowns as he listens to the recording of Olivia Castro's speech.]

Wang Xian-zhi (Mayfly survivor, Rotting Corpse drummer): Yeah, Olivia's full of shit. [Laughter.]

Interviewer: Why do you say that?

Wang: Sylvain—*Sylvia*. Sylvia didn't do all this to give us a choice, man. She hated immortality, plain and simple. She hated that we all gave up on our freedom because we were afraid of what might happen three hundred years down the line. What Olivia talks about isn't a choice at all. "Be young and healthy forever barring traumatic injury, or die a slow, agonizing death as your body breaks down." Who in hell would choose the latter?

Olivia's notion of freedom is like setting a cage on the edge of a cliff and opening the door. No one in their right mind would step out.

Now back before Sylvia, that door wasn't even open. Then came the attacks in '89—

Interviewer: The London Underground gas attacks that claimed the immortality of three hundred and fifty-seven victims.

Wang: Right, right. Back then, Sylvia and I were getting the band started on the Montreal music scene, and we'd play these songs that were critical of the Autocracy, right? So even though we had nothing to do with '89, the Secret Police had their eye on us. And the Secret Police had developed, like, this vaccine that could switch off your immortality. The Mayfly Shot, you know about it! They used it to threaten us.

Interviewer: Threaten you how?



Wang: Like, they'd rough us up pretty bad, then while a nurse tends to you, bam! They'd stab you with a syringe and let you think you just got the Mayfly Shot. Rattle our nerves. Shit, it worked.

Interviewer: Did you believe it at the time? That they had an immortality vaccine?

Wang: We didn't know for sure, but we were scared. I begged Sylvia to take it down a notch with the anti-Autocracy lyrics and speeches, but, man, she just didn't care. "Relax, Wangie!" she'd say, and she'd laugh that deep laugh of hers, like life was just a big joke. Then one day she showed up at practice and she had the syringe.



Video footage seized from Wang's personal collection, on lease from Montreal's Self-Enforcement Agency.

[The grainy, amateur video is shot in a loft in Downtown Montreal. It focuses on Sylvia Castro, unaware she's being filmed, as she bounces a small syringe on her knuckles, staring into the distance. At the back of the shot, someone is tuning an electric guitar.]

Wang Xian-zhi (offscreen, filming): What you got there, Syl?

[Sylvia looks up. Her long hair and painted face make her look unmistakably feminine. She twirls the syringe like a drumstick, and grins at the camera.]

Sylvia Castro: Mayfly Shot. Want a go?

Wang: Bullshit, man, that's totally mouthwash.

Sylvia: You think? Let's find out!

[Sylvia places the syringe against her arm, smiling wide.]

Wang: Hey. Hey! Sylvia! Take it easy, man!

[Sylvia pockets the syringe, seemingly pleased with Wang's reaction.]

Sylvia: Don't worry, I'm not gonna waste this for a documentary that no one's ever gonna watch.

Wang: Anything else you wanna say to the camera, since nobody's watching this?

Sylvia: [Cheerfully.] Fuck the Autocracy!

Esra Agnarsson (off-screen): Hey! Not cool.

Sylvia: See, Wangie? That's what I'm talking about. Eternal life has turned us all into wimps, man. We used to know better! "Better to burn out than to fade away."

Wang: Here we go—

Sylvia: You know I'm right. We've given up our freedoms because we're scared of what might happen a thousand years from now! It's fucked up.

Esra (off-screen): Living beats dying.

Sylvia: Does it? Maybe dying is the only way to live.

Wang: Okay. I'm turning this off.

[The video ends.]





Interviewer: State your name and occupation, please.

Doctor Gerald Stone: Doctor Gerald Stone, Mayfly Program Director.

Interviewer: What was your position at the time Castro was admitted?

Stone: I was the director of the Melody Dementia Care Center in Stark, New Hampshire. It wasn't devoted to Mayflies back then.

Interviewer: So Castro was considered mentally unsound when he—

Stone: She.

Interviewer: Yes, of course. I'm just careful around officials when it comes to Castro's... That is...

Stone: I'm a medical practitioner, Miss, not a politician.

Interviewer: Is this why you allowed Sylvia and the others freedom around the facilities?

Stone: It was a sound medical practice. By taking the vaccine, they had inflicted grievous self-harm. They condemned themselves to a slow, life-long death.

I just did what was right by them, as my patients. I gave them an environment where they could be themselves. Who cared about the Autocracy's official party line if these people were gonna die sixty, eighty years later? It was the humane thing to do. That's all.

Interviewer: Why do you think Sylvia Castro took the Mayfly Shot? Was it an act of suicide or rebellion?

Stone: Yes.



Attached: picture of Rotting Corpse in concert in the Melody community hall in January '91.

Description: Sylvia Castro, wearing a white tank top and frilly camouflage skirt over ripped fishnets, holds her fist up at a crowd of patients. The crowd, excited by the performance, hold up their fists in response. Behind Sylvia, to the right of the frame, is Wang Xian-zhi.



Esra Agnarsson (Mayfly survivor): Word got around. The way the rumors put it, Sylvia was running the asylum, like, literally. They put on punk performances almost every night. *Rotting Corpse*, but also a few others that had followed Sylvia's example and taken the shot, like *Short Flight* and *Kick the System*. There were rumors of drugs and sex, y'know. And other stuff.

Nabila Safar (Mayfly survivor): We couldn't believe it. Sylvia had spoken against the Autocracy, and now she was in some sort of utopian center where she played music and got to be a girl and shit! Like Esra said... Word got around.

Agnarsson: Some of us got hold of the Mayfly Shot. I asked Sylvia's friends, and someone put me in touch. Friend of a friend kinda deal. They didn't even charge me for it... They were just thrilled to give them out. All you had to do ▲

take it, and you'd get sent to Melody.

Interviewer: Did you realize you were gonna die if you took the vaccine?

Agnarsson: Well, yeah. But not right away, know what I mean? It just didn't feel real. Eighty years isn't a long time, but it's long enough that you don't have to think about it too much. Of course, I hadn't realized I'd get progressively older, y'know? I thought I'd stay twenty until I turned ninety, then bam, old woman.

Safar: I didn't really think about it at the time, to be honest. I thought someone would find a way to reverse the vaccine.

Agnarsson: Well, they did, but not before... [Agnarsson motions to her wrinkled face.]

Safar: Yeah.

Interviewer: What were you told when you got to the center?

Agnarsson: The medical staff called us "Mayflies." They said they wanted us happy in the time we had left, that this was a safe space. I remember one nurse—Jenny, I think her name was. She did my check-in, and near the end she took my hand and just... teared up. She couldn't speak for a while.

Interviewer: What about you, Sarah? Why didn't you take the shot?

Sarah al-Awqadi (childhood friend): Me? [Nervous laughter.] I was scared, what do you think? I mean, I thought about it. I even got my own shot. I sat in my room one night and put the tip of the syringe to my arm... I must have spent an hour just poking at my skin with it. But I... I couldn't go through with it. I just couldn't.

Interviewer: Do you regret not doing it?

Al-Awqadi: Well, no, I... [Long pause.] No.



Jenny Preston (Melody nurse): I didn't like their music. To call it "music" is charitable, to be honest. It was mostly yelling and mindless strumming on antique instruments. I got one of those old music files the Mayflies passed around, stuff like *Sex Pistols* and *Dead Kennedys*. First time I heard them, I thought the file was corrupted.

Interviewer: Were you aware that recordings were being smuggled out?

Preston: Not at first. When the Mayfly Riots started, though, there was no doubt where the rioters out there were getting their inspiration. Doctor Stone put security measures in place, but it didn't do any good. I'm pretty sure it was one of the orderlies smuggling out the recordings. We never found out who.

Interviewer: Stone didn't put a stop to the shows even then?

Preston: Well, the damage was already done. Besides, Doctor Stone would never let politics influence his medical practice. The only thing he cared about was the well-being of his patients, and it was clear they were happier this way.

Interviewer: One of the Mayflies has testified under oath that you were the one smuggling the tapes out.

Preston: Hmm.

Interviewer: You don't dispute it?

Preston: Probably someone out to get me. Like I said, the music was garbage.





James Maarten (rioter): Everybody in the movement saw the recordings. Sylvia and the others, they looked so damn *free*! No disciplinary circles, no loyalty broadcasts, no Secret Police. It made us question whether immortality was really worth it. We all understood you can't have a society of immortals without absolute rule of law, of course, but still, the question itself bugged the hell out of us.

Castro's choice meant that things could be different. None of us wanted to die, not really. I mean, the Mayfly Shot was outlawed at this point, but it was still available if you knew the right people. And sure, some in the movement ended up in Melody, but for most of us, it wasn't immortality that was the problem.

Interviewer: What was the problem, then?

Maarten: I, uh... [Nervous laugh.]

Interviewer: Can I show you a video?

[Maarten shrugs.]

Video attached: Maarten speech in September '82. He is standing in front of a small crowd in Central Park, holding up his fist and speaking in a megaphone being held by a woman with her face out of frame.

Maarten (in video): *We offered them peace, and they answered with crowd control drones! We held out our hand and they slapped it with nightsticks! You know why, right? [Incoherent whooping.] Yeah, I'll tell you why! Because violence is the only language the Autocracy understands. [Boos.] Violence is the only way they know!*

Maarten: Ah... [Pause.] Look, we weren't thinking straight... I never meant for the riots to happen. Those were fringe elements of the movement. Extremists.

Interviewer: You didn't mean what you said about the Autocracy?

Maarten: [Agitated.] No. No, of course not!



Interviewer: Tell me about your grandson.

Olivia Castro (grandmother of Sylvia Castro): He is a hero to us all. His thirst for freedom has inspired a new generation to not only embrace immortality and its infinite rewards, but also appreciate what it means by giving us a vision of the alternative. It helped a new generation understand the need for the Autocracy.

Interviewer: And as a person? Tell me how he was growing up.

Castro: Oh, well, what is there to tell? He was a happy little boy. Full of life and energy, always laughing and running around. That's what surprised me when I heard he took the Mayfly Shot... He always seemed to love life so much.

Interviewer: Were there early signs of his madness?

Castro: Yeah. Yeah, sure.

Interviewer: Can you talk about those?

Castro: Well, for one he liked girl clothes. And playing with dolls. Once his mom tried to convince him to play with trucks and took his dolls away, but he just put the trucks to bed and told them bedtime stories. [Laughter.]



Interviewer: Do you think this has something to do with his decision to take the shot?

Castro: No.

Interviewer: Perhaps his gender dysphoria caused him a great deal of stress... Do you think it's possible that—

Castro: I thought you were writing a history of the Mayflies? Is this line of questioning sanctioned by your university's monitors?

Interviewer: I mean no dis—

Castro: Well, I resent your implication that Sylvain's parents and I failed him as caretakers.

Interviewer: That's not what I'm saying at all.

[Long pause.]

Castro: Oh my, look at the time. My apologies, but I have to prepare for a meeting.



Interviewer: Describe Sylvia Castro in the last days.

Wang Xian-zhi: In public or in private? In public she was her old self, like, boisterous, didn't give a shit about authority. She'd say things just to rile you up, then laugh with her mouth open and her head thrown back, like she just heard the funniest joke. She'd party harder than any of us, even when she was stuck in bed. One time she had us pour vodka directly into her saline bag!

Interviewer: And in private?

Wang: Well, she was... quieter. She'd watch us from her bed with that big grin of hers, like she wanted to make sure everyone had a good time. But when she figured no one was looking, she'd get that look in her eyes.

Interviewer: That look?

Wang: You know, man. Like she couldn't wait for this shit to be over.



Interviewer: You were one of the first rioters to enter Melody, correct?

Herbert Gilmore (rioter): I was an activist, not a rioter. But yeah.

Interviewer: Why were you and other activists trying to enter the center?

Gilmore: The movement was losing steam. The media was portraying us as looters and madmen, so we knew we had to do something big. And the Mayflies, well, they had started all of this, right? We figured they could help. Especially Sylvia.

Interviewer: Were the Mayflies what you expected?

Gilmore: Not at all. I mean, I've seen pictures of old people from ancient times, I know what they're like. They don't feel real, though, know what I mean? You see all those wrinkles... You don't realize they're actual *grooves*. And some of the Mayflies didn't seem entirely lucid, either. And they moved so slow, like frozen bugs...



Interviewer: Tell me what it was like seeing the Mayflies for the first time in sixty years.

Gilmore: The Melody staff had moved them to the community hall because the Autocracy had warned them we were coming. We, well... We convinced the staff to let us talk to them. When I opened the door... It's the smell I noticed first. It was an *animal* smell, like when you get a whiff of a carcass by the side of the road, right? Except... It came from living human beings.

Interviewer: How did the Mayflies react?

Gilmore: They were... Honestly, they were relieved to see us. A bunch of them were crying. They thought we had come to save them.

Interviewer: Save them from what?

Gilmore: Yeah, well. That's the question that keeps me up at night.



Video footage seized from Wang's personal collection, on lease from Montreal's Self-Enforcement Agency.

[The video is shot at the Mayfly Center during the break-in, and shows Sylvia, in bed, surrounded by monitors and hooked up to a dialysis machine. Her cheekbones jut through the parchment-like skin of her face.]

Wang Xian-zhi (offscreen, filming): Sylvia! We gotta go! The protestors have broken in. They're here for us!

[Sylvia half-opens her eyes.]

Sylvia: Tell them they're too late.

Wang: C'mon, Syl. They say they can reverse the Mayfly Shot. We don't have to die anymore, man!

[Sylvia, her eyes now fully open, stares in silent anger at Wang.]

Wang: You're a legend out there, Sylvia! They need a leader.

Sylvia: [Tired chuckle.] Please. I can't even piss by myself anymore. [Long silence.] No... Better they think I went out rocking with my tits out and a cig in my mouth.

Wang: [Choking back tears.] C'mon, Syl. You can't die. Not you.

[Sylvia attempts to laugh, but all she manages is a wheeze. Still, in that moment, she looks something like her old self.]

Sylvia: Of course I can. I've been dying my whole life.



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