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The Cryo

Eric Reynolds

The city lights faded to a faint glow on the horizon behind us. The taxi brought me through the gate, to the curved drive at the edge of a long sidewalk that led into the grounds.

"Really is in the boonies, isn't it, Mr. Cox?" the driver said as we pulled up to the curb.

I nodded.

"Good luck, then," he said, accepting my tip. "I'll miss your column. And I have to say you've sold me on the idea. Maybe we'll see each other again, eh?"

I smiled at him politely. "Perhaps we will. But this is likely to get more popular, I doubt we'll ever run into each other."

I stepped onto the curb, my heart pounding in anticipation of seeing Mira again, though it would soon not beat at all. It'd be centuries before she and I would reunite, but I would feel the passage of only a few hours.

The taxi sped away, the automated sentry slid the gate closed and I found myself alone on the grounds. Two spotlights on the sidewalk ahead showed my path to the windowless cryo. The rectangular silhouette rose against the night sky, behind the foreground trees, like a massive tombstone with a tiny lighted entrance the only visible detail. It was a couple hundred meters away--they didn't allow common vehicles near the building. Special services were available to aid those who needed help, but I was in good enough health and I welcomed the walk to help calm my nerves.

The grounds were free of litter as if a groundskeeper had just made rounds, a reflection of how the cryo itself was presented. On my left, silhouettes of tall pines marched along the edge of the property toward the far boundaries and faded into the gloom beyond the cryo.

About halfway to the entrance a breeze puffed into my face, then a whiff of something like burnt grass. A man emerged from the shadows beneath the line of trees twenty or so meters to my left, or perhaps from the woods beyond. A groundskeeper, perhaps. He was barely visible, didn't pay any attention to me, just started walking toward the entrance.

Mira was inside the cryo, my chamber waited next to hers. I hadn't seen her since losing her almost two years ago. They didn't allow visitors to the chambers. She and I had decided she would be frozen before she succumbed to

her illness, hoping the technology of the distant future would save her. But I didn't realize how much it would affect me the moment they flipped the switch. She turned toward me and managed a feeble smile as she faded into hibernation. I was left with that memory as they whisked me away from the chambers area. And now, even though I was in good health, I couldn't wait any longer to join her. But how would I deal with our revival if future technology could do nothing for her? A risk we had decided to take.

The man caught my eye again. He kept pace with me, his dark gown brushed against the grass. I didn't recognize the style of clothing, and hadn't seen anything of the sort worn by the cryo groundskeepers on my previous visits.

But my appointed time was near and I didn't pay much attention to him. During my last consultation a cryo associate had reminded me of the punctuality clause in my contract and I wanted a moment to gaze at my Mira before they threw the switch on me. I started walking faster.

So did the man in the grass, keeping pace just ahead of me as he started to angle his way over toward the sidewalk ahead of me.

I slowed down a little. He slowed down, too, matching my speed.

I picked up the pace again. There was still a lot of sidewalk ahead of me. If only I could get to the entrance before he reached me.

He ran to the sidewalk ahead, stopped and faced me, cutting me off. Part of his face showed in the light exaggerating the roughness the day's beard growth. His eyes were still in the shadow of his brow, empty sockets staring at me, like a skull protruding from the featureless gown.

My arms and legs ached, my instincts urged me to turn and run. But I had no chance of outrunning him, not at my age.

Mira! What if she woke up without me?

"Do I know you, sir?" I said in as deep a voice as I could manage. But it came out high-pitched, squeaky.

He shook his head.

I hoped whatever his intentions he had some amount of humanity and would let me pass. "They told me not to bring anything," I said. "I have nothing of value. Just a small handheld with an image of my wife. She's waiting for me, you see."

He must have been half my age, was much taller. He took a couple of steps toward me.

"I warn you not to go," he said. I couldn't place the accent.

"But they're expecting me."

"There's no more room." He sounded as if suppressing an anger burning inside, fighting to get out.

"I have an appointment. My chamber's waiting."

He took another step toward me, I took a step back.

"Go back home, Cox. Remain in your own time."

"How do you know me?"

"From your publication. Go back to it. Tell the masses to stay away from here!"

"You have no right."

"No, it is you who has no right." He continued to approach me, I continued to back away.

"Somebody please help!" My jittery voice echoed off the cryo and throughout the grounds, into the woods beyond. I looked around, hoping someone from inside would burst through the entrance, or that someone would come running from the grounds. But no one came.

He stepped up to arm's length. I saw his entire face. He had well-pronounced frown lines, more so than normal

for his age. He looked as if he'd lost many nights' sleep, straining to keep his eyes open. But the eyes themselves stabbed into me, vibrant and full of hate.

"You're naïve thinking people of the future will welcome you," he said.

I'd heard of the cults that opposed cryonics. I expected him to retrieve a tract from the folds of his gown.

"They will if we instill the importance of this to future generations. Everyone will benefit when the Cure is finally found. The future is what we and our children make it."

He grabbed my arm. "Leave that future to your children! You have no right to it!" His clench grew tighter.

I wanted to be there for Mira in that future. But I could accept whatever happened to me now if I knew she'd be all right without me.

"Please, sir, my wife waits for me. We want to be together in that future. A second chance for us--"

He grabbed both my shoulders and shook me. "Don't you understand, Cox? I am from that future! The cryonics chambers fill the cities! *We don't want to revive you!*"

Eric writes: But what would happen if everybody wanted to be frozen shortly before their deaths? Let's say nine billion people live in the world of 2050. Figure a small percentage of the population will have access to cryonics at first because it'll be expensive until it's ready for the masses. Not all cultures will take part, let's make a conservative guess that 500 million people of varying ages will sign up. Where will they keep all those bodies? How much power will it take to keep them cool? Once civilian space travel ramps up they could be shipped off the lunar poles in one of those perm shadowed craters, or eventually we could send them out to the Kuiper Belt. But we won't be ready for that yet.

Medical science continues to improve the human life span at its current rate and a baby born in 2100 can live an average of 120 years. So human population continues to grow. By now we've established a few lunar outposts, and are trying to terraform Mars (good luck!) except the damned Martian weather won't cooperate. Chaos is a funny thing to mess with. So we still haven't established enough of a presence beyond Earth to hold all our dear brothers and sisters who await the Cure. Human population is in the teens of billions plus we've got these cryonics organizations sprouting up all over the place. (Watch out for those cul-rate places!) Another century or two pass and we've got frozen bodies by the billions. Even if human population levels off, the frozen nation continues to grow.

I'll be damned if they don't come up with the Cure in 2407--after all, it's just an engineering problem. No longer does anyone have to die. Good thing we've finally started some serious colonizing beyond Earth because there's going to be a whole lot of us real soon, what with all the reproducing still going on (albeit at lower rates) and none of us dying.

And then there's all those frozen bodies. Getting to be a nuisance, they are. What incentive do we have to bring all them back? Well yes, we do still have compassion in the 25th Century, but what a monstrous undertaking it'll be reviving all those people. Where are we going to put them? Most are frail. The problem isn't the Cure, just the logistics of it. Even their descendants consider them more of a curiosity, even a nuisance. Sure I'd like to meet my great-great-great grandfather, but is he (and his mother, and his children, the their children) my responsibility? Better work that into the contract and bind your descendants to it.

Now this doesn't mean I don't want to be frozen any less than the next guy. (In fact I sent in a short message to a French company a couple of years ago that was creating a time capsule to be launched into Earth orbit, which will then be retrieved in the year 50,000. My message states where to find my remains so that they can revive me. But that assumes they can read (I was going to say, assumes they can read English or French, but 50,000 years is so far away who knows how humans will interact. One thing's for sure--they won't be speaking English or any other known language of today.) So let's do some planning first. Once the Cure is found we'll stop freezing people so the number of years, or centuries, we go through this exercise is finite. Yeah, maybe the Kuiper Belt is a good place to stick 'em. We don't have to revive them all at once, just do it over a period of, say, a couple of centuries.

But we'd better start looking beyond the Solar System for a place to live. At the rate we're going, if we stop dying, one person's offspring will eventually fill the Known Universe. By the ninth millennium, there'll be just a few orders of magnitude less than one googol of my offspring alone crammed into the Known Universe. It's going to get pretty crowded and I wonder where they'll put yours.