

Frozen Out

by

Robert Sharp

‘Maggie, can we talk?’

He says it as a question, but really it’s a statement. His hands grab my shoulders and he manoeuvres me into the chair, his leather armchair. This manhandling reminds me a bit of when we would make love. William would grab me by the shoulders and position me on the bed, as if he was laying out his military kit.

I perch on the edge of the seat. The last time he sat me down for a chat it was to tell me that his prostate trouble was back, so now a tiny bubble of worry is forming in my stomach. I fold my hands together and place them firmly on my lap, holding my tummy in, keeping myself corked.

‘What is it, Bill? I’ve got to put the sausages on in a bit.’

Now I’m sitting still he bounds over to the bureau and pulls out a white folder. It’s some kind of prospectus. He grabs one of the footstools and places it beside me. He sits down, awkwardly. The stool is too short and suddenly he’s all knees. I assume that he’ll get up and find something else, but instead he hugs at his knees like a schoolboy.

He takes a deep breath, and begins.

‘I’ve been thinking about my... arrangements. For when I... you know...’

‘For when you die?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh Bill! We went through all that last time, remember? I know John Hubbard’s retired now, but Reverend Hale is a lovely woman, she’ll do it well, and the hymns you picked are just perfect.’

He opens his mouth to speak, but I grab his wrist. ‘Don’t make me go through all that again, I don’t like to think about it.’

I stand up. 'And anyway, there's nothing to say that its going to happen any time soon. It's just, well, the prostate, its just... back. There's lots we can still do. Don't give up.'

I make to leave for the sausages, but he puts out his arm like the policeman used to do at crossroads.

'Please, Maggie.' He proffers the folder. I sigh, and flop back into the leather.

'Be careful with the chair,' he says.

I ignore him. He is so precious about the bloody chair. 'What is it, Bill? What have you got there.'

His eyes tighten with enthusiasm as he opens the folder.

'This,' he says, 'is the prospectus for the Cryocor Foundation.'

I take the folder from him. It's made of thick card-stock and has a glossy, laminated cover. There's an illustration on the front: an abstract figure of a person in a box with lines coming out of them. Wires, maybe, or tentacles.

'Some kind of investment?' I ask.

He smirks. 'You could say that.' He waits for me to open the folder, but I leave it shut on my lap and just look at him. I can't really be bothered with William's schemes just now.

'The company is the world leader in cryonics.'

I shake my head. No idea.

'They freeze bodies in cryogenic tanks.'

I giggle.

'And and then...' He coughs. 'And then, they... erm... they wait for science to advance to the stage where...'

'... they can be resurrected?'

'Yep. Exactly.'

Oh, William! 'And you want to invest with these people?'

Now it's William's turn to giggle. 'No Maggie. I want to be the one that gets frozen.'

There is nothing wrong with my ears. I heard him correctly. I stop laughing.

'You're joking.'

I look at him, still hunched on the stool. He stares back at me, scanning my face.

He's not joking.

I shake my head. 'Don't be ridiculous. It's... it's bonkers. It's a fantasy.' For the first time, I open the white folder and flip through the pages. 'It's a fraud!'

'No, Maggie, it's not.'

'But they can't bring people back to life. That's ridiculous.'

William shakes his head. 'That's not what they do. They just freeze me. Then I have to wait for medical science to... catch up.'

The worry bubble inside me has burst, and now something hotter is growing in there. I put my fingers on my temples and massage my head.

William fills the silence. 'Basically, when you're on the way out, you call the standby team to come and freeze you. Then they take you off to Arizona where you're stored.' He pulls the folder from my lap, licks his fingers, and turns the pages. 'There's a picture of the facility on page seven, see?'

I don't look.

'You can have just your brain preserved if you want, but that seems a bit weird to me. So I'm going for the full body preservation option on page eighteen.'

I open my mouth and speak without thinking.

'And how much does it cost?' As if that matters.

It appears that William memorised the figures. ‘Well there’s the annual membership fee of seven-hundred-and-fifty dollars—that will probably rise with inflation, of course. And then the cost of the post-mortem treatment is three hundred thousand dollars.’

I bow my head. This is infuriating.

‘That’s dollars, Maggie. Not pounds.’

‘Pounds, dollars, whatever. We don’t have that money hanging around... unless you have some secret account you’re not telling me about?’ If there is one thing I know about William it is that he definitely does not have a secret bank account. The man can’t keep a Valentine’s Day present hidden properly, let alone an off-shore nest-egg.

And then he explains to me how we can release the equity in the house to pay for the procedure, but that I will be able to live here indefinitely, and it will only be sold when I no longer need it.

‘Its not as if Becky and Roger need the money, do they?’

It is as if he has punched me in the chest. I look away from him, and to the photo of Becky on the coffee table. Our darling daughter on her wedding day, clutching the well-groomed, well-heeled, well-off Roger like a prize. No, they don’t need the money.

Next to Becky’s frame is another wedding photo, taken thirty-one years earlier. William and me, in the church porch, when we were both twenty-three. Two lifetimes ago, that photo. I remember the lace on the collar of my dress chafing at my neck, and clutching his hands so tightly as I promised to love, honour and obey. We still said ‘obey’ in those days, but I didn’t mind. I wanted to be this adventurer’s wife, and to be by his side as he travelled the world. He already had a vice-consul

posting at the Embassy in Burma, and he said he wanted me with him.

So off we went, first to the church, and then to Rangoon. It was thrilling. Later we went to Nairobi, to Prague, to Paris, and finally, to Reigate.

I look again at the photo. It was a snap decision to marry William but I have never regretted it.

He speaks: 'Gerry and Ian think it's a good idea.'

Right. So he's discussed with his golfing buddies already, has he?

'I mean, Gerry's an actuary, right. He says that in cost-benefit terms it's actually a no-brainer. It might not work, but if it does then the payoff is infinite. And if I don't do it, well, then, I'm definitely dead forever.'

'We're all dead in the long run, Bill.'

'But maybe not! Don't you see? There are advances every day, Maggie. Didn't you hear about that Italian doctor doing head transplants and freezing monkeys? And that's right now, so there's sure to be something better in the future.'

He stands up and begins to pace. 'The only way to have any kind of chance to beat it – death I mean – is if I take steps to preserve myself for the future. Gerry says it's a bit like... what's that chap that Reverend Hale mentioned in her sermon? A Pascal's Wager. You know, where you might as well believe in Jesus, because that's the only way you'll get...'

'I know who Blaise Pascal is, Bill.'

He skips back over to the armchair and slaps me on the knee. 'Of course you do! Of course you do! Well then, you understand?'

'If Gerry thinks its such a good gamble then why isn't he doing it too?'

'Oh, well, you know, Carole wouldn't let him...'

I roll my eyes. He puts his hands on his hips and cocks his head as he looks at me. 'But you're not like that are you, Maggie?'

Comparing me to Carole is the last straw. I leap up out of the chair. He's startled, and steps back.

'I cannot believe how selfish you are being, William!'

He regains his poise, and shouts back: 'And I can't believe how short-sighted you're being! For once in your life, have a radical thought. I am reaching for immortality here, and I would like your bloody support!'

Now I'm angry and I need to be away from his face. I head for the kitchen and he doesn't follow. A moment later I hear heavy footsteps on the stairs.

I pull the frozen sausages out of the bag and slam them onto the oven tray. Why did I moan about the cost? Why did I call him selfish? I should have just come straight out with what I wanted to ask, but could not:

'Why don't you want me to come with you?'