

OZ

By Michele Dutcher

"I guess you received my message," said the twenty-something man standing at the top of the concrete stairs. He waited there a moment, allowing the middle-aged woman to catch up with him.

"I got it, but I couldn't believe it," she answered, panting slightly. "I didn't realize you were so unhappy."

The rain was pounding on the metal roof covering the patio, and the young man wished it were possible to drown out his mother's words.

"You always knew this was an option, mama."

"It was Tela leaving, wasn't it?" She placed her hand on his arm and squeezed it reassuringly. "People break up, Cooper. They break up and move on. Don't do this thing."

He looked down at his shoes and sighed. "It's not just Tela, mama. I've been watching you and the way you always just barely make it by..."

"I'm okay, sweetheart. I'm not fancy, but I'm comfortable -- just like everyone else in the world."

He clinched his fists at the words. "That's my whole point. I don't want to be 'just like everyone else'. I'm better than that." His hands motioned violently towards the drenched nighttime city. "Look at them, all three billion of them. The Planetary Fund gives everyone the same portion of the world's resources, which is fine if you're okay with just getting by."

"I always have been," she interrupted.

"Well I'm not. You'll see. She'll see. When I'm awakened in two years, I'll have saved enough money to buy a house and get the training I need to be somebody -- somebody important."

"But some people don't wake up, Cooper. Have you thought of that? Have you thought of how I would feel if you didn't come out of it?"

He finally turned towards her, putting his hands on her elbows, shaking her a little. "I will come back, mama. I promise. This is just a way to get a headstart, that's all. It's just a way to get a financial jump on everyone else." He released her and was gone again, appearing to run into his own nightmare. "Did you tell her I was going under? Did you tell Tela what I was going to do?"

The mother drew her sweater up around her shoulders, as if contemplating how to answer. "Yes, I told her."

"What did she say?"

The mother sighed, backed up, and then offered up the truth. "She said you wouldn't go through with it. That you would fail at this the way you always failed at everything else."

"Bitch". Cooper fought the urge to say more. "I'm putting her down as my beneficiary -- in case I don't come back. You and her together, mama...you can split my savings. I wasn't good enough for her, but maybe my money will be."

"Don't talk like that," his mother sobbed. "Forget this foolishness and let's go home. Things won't feel so bad in a week, I promise."

"I can't go back. I've already accepted the appointment." He turned to look at her, avoiding the tears on her face. "Will you take care of my cat, mama? Promise me you'll take care of my cat, so I can see her when I get back."

"I promise, sweetheart. I promise." The mother looked down at concrete stairs towards the unending streets and buildings. "Don't do this thing, Cooper..." But he didn't hear her. The glass doors had already closed behind him.

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The handsome woman in the drab olive suit looked over the crowd as she stepped into the room. She checked her wristband display as she walked towards a small stage. "296 inductees," she whispered to herself. "Nice crop,"

"Inductees! Your attention please!"

All talking ceased as heads turned towards the person in the front of the room. Cooper looked up from his handheld game as well.

The leader smiled placidly, as if to reassure her captive audience. "The Planetary Fund welcomes you and appreciates your call to service. While in hibernation, your stress upon the environment will be lessened to almost non-existent. Society as a whole thanks you for your generous act." The half-hearted smile disappeared, replaced by a look of blind detachment.

"Before the Fund separates you into small groups -- prior to beginning your service -- we need to go over just a few basic points. This will focus us, so we're all on the same page."

The leader moved her hand from left to right, palm facing outward. The men and women couldn't see the words, but they knew she was viewing a holographic, officially approved list.

"First -- the cryogenic procedure used in the warehouse behind me is safe 99.9% of the time. But ... your chances of failure increase with the amount of time spent in frozen hibernation. Assess your financial needs realistically, please. The shorter your enlistment term -- the greater your chance of success." She looked into the crowd. "Questions?" Quiet. She continued reading off the list.

"All inductees will continue to receive your monthly allotment-- 2700 Euros -- which will be held in savings until you are awakened. The amounts acquired will be dependent upon the length of hibernation."

She put her hands behind her back and glanced up again. "Questions?" A few gestured 'no', but most remained motionless. The leader continued.

"Within the last four days, inductees should have seen the specified stimulus movie six times. This film will begin playing somewhere within your deep dreamscape when it is time to wake up. At that point you will say the five words embedded within that stimulus movie to awaken and rejoin our society." The leader lifted her left hand. "By raising your hand and saying 'I have' you will signify that you have viewed the required visual material as ordered and have memorized the appropriate verbal response."

The leader was followed by 296 others who all repeated "I have".

"Inductees, we will now separate you into small groups. When your contracted term is called, follow the assistant to my right. Six months."

Five dozen men and women stood, walked forward and left the room.

"One year." One hundred and twenty-six inductees did as instructed.

In six month increments, the crowd was thinned until it was whittled down to six men sitting in the immensely empty room. The leader came down from her perch and told the six to sit in front of her.

"Gentlemen," she began softly, "I would strongly advise against your planned 24 month term. Twenty-percent of inductees who try this length of cryostasis aren't able to return. Some of these are kept alive in a vegetative state, but never recover from their coma. The others simply die within their tubes. Statistically, one of you four will die if you insist upon a 24 month term of hibernation."

One man stood, put his hands in his pockets and began walking towards the door. "I'll cut back to 18 months." He left the room.

The others, including Cooper, refused to budge.

"Okay, inductees," said the stony woman with a blank stare, "follow me".

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The official count of those in frozen cryostasis was 211,624, but looking at the warehouse full of body tubes, there might as well have been a million.

"It's a mind numbing sight the first time. It takes everyone a moment or two to regain their composure. These tubes need only a few cents each to operate per day. That's why a person's entire monthly allocation can be saved up during your deepsleep."

Cooper drew a deep breath before stepping onto the metal boardwalk running to his left. They were quickly approached by a dull man in a spotless uniform.

"This is Doctor Richards. He will begin your physical transition."

Cooper turned to the leader, extending his hand.

The leader followed suit, shaking the inductee's hand firmly. "Do all of you remember the movie you'll see in your deepdream when it's time to come out of hibernation?"

"We do, sir."

"And do you remember the five magic words you will need to repeat to fire up your brain?"

"We do, sir."

"Five magic words. Remember them above all others. Now, I need all of you to imprint this document." An electronic form appeared in midair. "It releases the Department of Cryogenics from any responsibility if you are unable to make it back."

"I'll make it back," said Cooper, placing his left hand towards the document. "I'll see you in twenty-four months."

Doctor Richards motioned for the five to follow him deeper inside the facility.

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It was snowing again, deep inside Cooper's dream. It seemed it was always snowing these days. He drew his wool coat's collar up around his neck, burying his mouth and nose in his knitted scarf. Inside his deepdream, he was waiting for a bus, early on a pre-dawn January morning. He pulled a cell phone from his coat pocket, flipped it open, and checked the time. 7:10 AM. He was here at 5th and Market, twenty minutes early, hoping to see her again. He shifted a little, trying to warm himself, eventually retreating into the doorway of a Skyline Chili restaurant.

And then she was there at the corner. She walked confidently in an ankle length red coat and short black boots. Cooper had counted her steps before as she strolled past him on her way to work. Eleven steps took her just past his doorway shelter.

Five, six, seven. He could see her green eyes now, looking at the snowy sidewalk in front of her as she picked her way around the small snowy drifts. Eight, nine, ten...she was upon him now, close enough to touch. Cooper was thankful that the hibernation committee had seen fit to place Tela's image into his deepdream.

She looked over at him as he huddled in the doorway and she nodded politely. He nodded back cordially. Eleven steps, twelve -- and she was beyond him.

"I still miss you. Everyday." Cooper whispered these words reverently, like a prayer.

She moved slightly, as if to acknowledge him, but she returned to her routine, walking straight ahead.

Cooper checked the time again, deciding to go inside the small bakery two doorsteps up. "I have some time," he told himself.

The storefront bakery was warm with the smell of hot, fresh sweetbreads. He paid for two donuts -- one glazed and one chocolate covered -- and a small coffee in a Styrofoam cup. He took his breakfast and laid it out on a circular table in front of the street windows. Damn. The people who caught the bus with him were gone. The bus must have come early and picked them up while he was buying the donuts. Still, he wouldn't be all that late. He would be okay.

Before he realized he was eating, the chocolate donut was ingested. He wondered why he wasn't feeling any warmer. "I guess this January cold must have sunk down into my bones."

He was halfway through the glazed donut when he gathered up his coffee and went back outside. The snow was falling faster now, with large white flakes that shimmered like floating diamonds in the light of an electric streetlamp. The snowflakes were the widest he had ever seen.

Cooper checked the schedule on the side of the bus shelter by Market Street. Damn. It would be another twenty minutes before another bus came. He returned to his doorway, holding his coffee close to his face. He took a sip. It was already cold. He squatted down in the doorway, pulling his coat tighter around his legs. He wondered if it had been two years yet. It seemed like forever.

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"Mrs. Miller," said the leader, "we've been trying to revive your son but he is simply not responding." The leader and the mother were walking quickly towards the cryogenic tube marked 6,243. "Your son was informed that thirty months of hibernation was a dangerous endeavor. We have your son's imprinted contract on file."

They were beside his opened tube, his body temperature was continuing to rise as warm fluids were pumped into his arteries.

Doctor Richards joined them. "This happens sometimes. His body is working perfectly but he is trapped inside his own mind. It is ultimately up to him to come out of it...or die. Eventually his organs will shut down, one after the other."

"Can I hold him, doctor? Can I just hold him?"

Dr. Richards slowly nodded affirmatively, knowing this mother was probably watching her son die.

Cooper's skin was cold beneath her fingertips. Shaw touched his eyes and lips. She knelt over his paralyzed body, wrapping her arm around his chest and waist. If only he had chosen twelve months instead of two years. If only she had stopped him completely.

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If Cooper had been born in the late 1900s, he would have known the warm feeling he was experiencing was a sign that he was freezing to death. But since he was from the 24th century, he had no such knowledge and began to enjoy the sensation.

The sky was beginning to lighten over the corner of 5th and Market. There was a small crowd gathering around the man freezing to death in the doorway of Skyline Chili. Someone had called 911 on their cellphone and an ambulance would be there soon to haul away the body.

Inside the Skyline Chili, an assistant manager had arrived to open up the tiny eatery, absentmindedly flipping on the small TV in the corner. Dorothy was standing on the yellow brick road on the American Movie Classic station.

"Follow the yellow brick road," said the munchkin mayor. "Follow the yellow brick road."

Cooper couldn't hear the sound, but his eyes looked towards the screen briefly before closing for good.

As the sunrise gave way to daybreak, the small crowd began to disperse, leaving the dead man to be cleaned up by the paramedics.

"He kept saying something weird, mama," seven-year-old Suzanne told her mother as they walked away from the scene.

"I'm sorry you had to see that dear," said her mother.

"But he kept saying something weird," repeated the child.

"He was probably just some homeless man." The child tugged on her coat sleeve, insistently. "Okay, sweetheart, what did he say?"

"He kept mumbling -- 'There's no place like home. There's no place like home.'"

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"...Attendant! Call the mother back. We have brain activity."

The End