

## Just Going Outside

*Writers' Billboard's short story competition winner, November 2014.*

Who would you bring back from the dead? For Millie there's only one choice.

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Millie could see the helicopter's shadow below, flickering over the endless snow. The Ross Ice Sheet, a sub-zero wilderness the size of France. No wonder they never found him. Until now. Global warming had its upside.

"ETA in two minutes," came the pilot's voice in her earphones.

And then, out of the dazzling whiteness, the camp appeared. Tents, men, equipment and, most of all, a tarpaulin to cover the excavation. A black jewel glittering in the sludge.

Millie's footsteps crunched across the ice. A few seconds out and her face began to sting. The cold forced its way into her lungs and from there around her body, carried in the blood. The deep freeze. But was it deep enough to save him? She glanced at the bleakness all around her. The sky crushed the glacier under its vast emptiness. She was in the middle of a blank continent. As if the universe had been drained away.

Sanderson stood shivering beside the tarpaulin. A great bear of a man, his bulky physique strained against the seams of his parka.

"Report," she said. The air was too cold to waste on sentences.

"Done," he responded.

"You mean—?"

He stroked his snow-flecked beard.

"Successfully extracted to the bio-unit, ready for transportation."

"Corpus intacto?"

"Pristine."

The sun caught the landscape in its dying rays. Snow fields burned red. Millie looked at all the blood tinted ice and let out a triumphant sigh.

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The Clinic's bleached rooms were as colourless as the Antarctic. Millie joined Sanderson at the observation window, outside the containment chamber. They stared in at the ice mummy. It was floating in a glass tank, brimming with amniotic fluids.

"Stage One's gone well, Professor," Sanderson said.

Millie stirred.

"Nano-mite conversion at ninety percent?"

"A-huh. You were right to go slow. Defrost, re-hydration, cellular repair. I'm amazed how much we're reclaiming."

"Will we succeed?"

Sanderson placed his hand, the size of a grizzly's paw, on her shoulder.

"Those little robots are working like troopers. Creeping through his tissues, rebuilding the DNA. But you know as well as I do, he's too far gone. No one's ever reanimated a corpse more than six days dead."

"No one's ever worked on a cadaver preserved in the ice."

"For a hundred and fifty years? Millie, you must be prepared for failure."

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"No!"

She clenched her fists.

"Why? Why is this one so important?"

She turned away.

"Commence Stage Two."

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Stage Two didn't work. Millie ordered them to keep trying. She bawled at the accountants and made false promises to the CEO. All the lies were worth it. Finally, the spark caught. The reconstructed heart trembled, shuddered and began beating. Blood flowed through veins, once desiccated now corporeal. Lungs, buried for decades in a glacier, now sucked in oxygen. Cells multiplied. Nutrients were fed in by tubes and flushed the digestive system. Even stubble bloomed on the cheeks.

It was no longer a cadaver, but a man. Yet still not alive.

"He's brain dead, Millie. I told you."

She glared at Sanderson, hating him for his negativity.

"A Japanese nano-therapy is arriving tonight. The most advanced on the planet," she replied.

"Even if it works, what next? Tutankhamun?"

Millie frowned.

"Why don't you just clone your dead explorer? We've got the DNA." Sanderson asked.

"That would be a copy. As blank as a sheet of paper."

"But why him?"

She hesitated. She couldn't bottle it up any longer.

"I was reading up on him when Mum brought the news."

"The news?"

"My father had dropped dead. Heart attack."

"Ah!"

Sanderson thought for a few moments.

"Maybe it's your father you really want to bring back?" he said gently.

Millie clenched her fists.

"Too bad long term decomposition is irreversible," she replied coldly.

"Mud is no substitute for ice," Sanderson said. "But Professor, Millie, all the grief in the world can't resurrect the dead."

"Yes, it can!"

She was shouting.

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The Japanese nana-mites proved stubborn machines. They crawled through the vast labyrinth of the brain, fusing synapses and patching neurons. If the connection failed they repeated their work, over and over. By now the staff referred to him as The Patient. He was moved to a medical bed. While microscopic robots toiled away invisibly, dedicated nurses worked around the clock. Vitals were constantly measured and the meds adjusted.

Six months after the discovery at the Ross Ice Sheet, Millie and Sanderson stood at the patient's bedside. Watching.

Sanderson spoke first.

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"There will be huge gaps in his memory. And he'll have to re-learn so much, everything from walking to reading."

Millie nodded.

"Like a newborn."

The Patient shifted under the pure white blanket. His musculature was slender, like a boy's. Yet the square-jaw and aquiline nose gave the look of a hero. His breathing grew stronger and the eyes, slowly, opened.

Millie leaned over the bed and grasped his hand. For the first time in years, she no longer felt lost.

"Captain Oates," she said. "It's been some time."

*The End*