

THE NIGHTMARE

By Fred Russell

WHY WE LIKE IT: *People low on serotonin grumble there's not much good sci/fi these days. (And some go as far as saying there's no good literature, period.) We think these guys need a shot of the 'happy hormone'. The story excerpt you are about to read will restore your faith in a genre that is ever thriving (especially if you're a sci/fi junkie). Although this one appears to spring from Arthur C. Clarke lineage, the author cites American social novelists as a formative influence and one can see 'The Nightmare' as an updated take on Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passo. It addresses questions about cryonics and digitalization that will impact on the future of human kind. The story contains not so much a moral as a warning. Russell's prose is swift and business-like. Quote: 'The American President declared that it was a tribute to old-time American ingenuity and initiative that the destruction of the planet had not affected the American economy in the least, as the food industry instantly found new chemicals to replace the traces of natural foodstuffs still present in their products and free enterprisers found new ways to get people to buy what they didn't need or couldn't afford.' And entertaining read but also a reality check.*

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It was cryonics. Everyone was doing it. They even gave you three options. The first was the fast track, where they woke you up when they had a cure for your disease.

The second was the eternal life track, where they woke you up when they had a cure for death itself. The third was the pick-a-year track where you yourself got to choose when they woke you up. The pros and cons were debated endlessly on TV and the Internet. I had terminal cancer but I went with the third option. I didn't pick the first because no matter when they found the cure, I would still be an old man when they woke me up. I also figured that it would take a very long time before they could do

away with death altogether, if at all, so I decided to pick a year in the remote future when it was feasible that they might have and I could also get to see how life on Earth had turned out in the long run. I was a curious type and history fascinated me. I picked the year 10,000.

The procedure was simple. It was pretty much what we had read about in the old science fiction novels or saw in the movies, namely, freezing with liquid hydrogen and storage in a kind of vault or mausoleum. Great advances had been made and the entire society had geared up for it. There was no question that it worked. People who had been frozen for fifty years were now returning to life none the worse for wear and running around with their new plastic hearts as if there was no tomorrow. The basic procedure was also no longer exorbitantly expensive and maintenance fees were reasonable. This was what the human race had wanted and this was what the human race had gotten.

However, "dying" in this way was just as wrenching as dying in the conventional way. Families mourned, but at least they could say a leisurely farewell and even convince themselves that they were attending a going-away party, like the ones before an ocean cruise. In most families, members choosing the third option chose the same wakeup date so that they could be together right from the start. I, however, was the first in the family to go, so I suppose I was seen as the family pioneer. My wife promised to choose the same year when her time came. The children were undecided, so we debated the issue among ourselves just as they did on TV.

"Why wait so long?" my son said. "What if they eliminate death in five hundred or a thousand years?"

"The later you come back the more you'll know about how things turned out for the race," I said

"But things will be so different. It's better to start off in a world where everything is still familiar."

And so on and so forth.

We had all gotten together the night before I was scheduled to check into the local cryocenter. I was actually in a good mood but everyone else was a little downhearted, so I tried to cheer them up.

"We'll all meet up again somewhere down the line," I said. "Then we'll be together forever."

"I hope so," my wife said.

"Look how far science has taken us. It gets better every year. Imagine what it will be like in the year ten thousand."

"It could be a nightmare," my son said.

"Not if we're still here. If we're still here it's a sign that everything worked out and the race survived."

"You're an incurable optimist, Dad," my son said.

"As long as they cure the cancer, I can live with the optimism."

My older son was a pessimist. Anyone with eyes in his head, he was always saying, could see the direction human civilization was taking. According to him, we were already living in the future, wired into vast communications systems and spending more and more time glued to a digitalized screen, and in the process losing our humanity. I thought back to the beginning of the century and realized that it had been that way then too. The future is always more of the same, as someone once said, and I guess that was true, from *Homo habilis* down to that fellow with the funny name – Steve Jobs, I think it was. And yet, as my son had said, I was the eternal optimist. I

always believed that things would turn out all right in the end because there was something in us that knew how to say no.

It wasn't just technology that my son was against. "The wrong people are running the world," he liked to say. That meant politicians, entrepreneurs and journalists. The journalists were tacked on because they were in charge of information and therefore responsible for our ignorance, for according to him they were only journalists because they didn't have the talent, knowledge and understanding to be historians or writers. "Most of them don't even understand the languages of the countries they report from and comment on. And they're the ones who shape our perception of the world. Can you believe a thing like that?" He was always entertaining us with his takes on current events. He was the intellectual in the family. I guess I was the comedian. Nonetheless I liked to think he'd gotten his mind from me.

I wasn't due to check in until noon the next day so we spent the following morning together too, taking a nice long walk. I was in a wheelchair, so my older son pushed me. The grandchildren were there too. I could imagine that there would be thousands of us when I woke up.

"Let's get some ice cream," my younger son said. "You won't be seeing any of that where you're going."

"Who knows," I said. "If they can keep me frozen, they can keep anything frozen."

Everyone laughed but we had the ice cream anyway. It was in one of those old-fashioned ice cream parlors. There was a lot of nostalgia going around. Some people were still convinced that things had been better in the past. There were all kinds of protest movements too, some of them pretty violent and all of them dedicated to fighting progress. But as I said, I believed in the future. That's why I had chosen to live in it.

After we finished our ice cream we walked through the park. I couldn't help remembering my childhood, because I had grown up near a park like this one. I felt like saying to my son, You see, there are still trees and grass and flowers and there always will be, so what are you complaining about. Aside from which, cars drove themselves, robots did our dirty work and people were buzzing around space like flies. But I had to admit that something in me too yearned for less hectic times. The irony of course was that the more the technologies accelerated, the more passive we became.

It was almost time and I felt something tighten in my stomach. This wasn't of course an ordinary goodbye that I was saying. Though I wouldn't have thought to admit it to anyone, it did feel something like being about to be taken out for an execution, or at the very least being taken away to serve a long term in prison. I would be imprisoned in a capsule for nearly eight thousand years, but then, I believed, I would be forever free.

I said goodbye to everyone individually, to my wife, to my two sons and their wives, and to the grandchildren. My wife and I sat on a park bench holding hands. We had lived a fairly harmonious life though understandably with less passion in the later years. There were of course also many practical matters to attend to and therefore I had written up very detailed instructions for everyone, including how to take care of the houseplants. I was a stickler for detail.

"When you decide to go," I told my wife, "make sure that all the windows are closed upstairs."

"Don't worry about it," she said.

"You don't want the rain to come in."

"All right."

"Well, this is it," I said after an awkward silence.

"Are you afraid?"

"I don't know. Maybe a little." Despite my bravado I could feel my self-confidence leaking away, and now ironically it was my wife who struck the upbeat note.

"They say it's foolproof," she said.

"I know. But still. It's leaving everything behind."

"But then we'll all be together forever. You said so yourself."

"It isn't easy saying goodbye."

"Do you want a nice warm hug?"

"That will help."

We cried a little. She was more prone to tears but I could cry too.

Afterwards we all went to the Center together. Naturally we lingered outside for a while, but then I got up my courage and left them standing where they were, just waving one last time from the other side of the glass door. The rest was surprisingly easy. In the end, it felt more like going in for an operation. I'd had one or two in my time. A nurse took care of all the preparations and before I knew it I was lying on an operating table and someone was sticking a needle in my arm. That was when I closed my eyes.

I remembered everything. It took about ten seconds but then I knew where I was and how I had gotten there. Someone was standing over me. It was a woman but she didn't look like any woman I had ever seen, more like a lifesize doll though she had a body as supple as ours and what turned out to be an ordinarily expressive face. Her skin, though, had an odd sheen and the features were too perfect. She was also wearing a full-length bodysuit that seemed to have been painted on.

"Are you a robot?" I said.

"I'm your guide," she replied in a perfectly normal voice.

I was lying flat on my back, on a kind of gurney. I looked around. There were other gurneys in the room, all in a row, and people sitting or lying on them with "guides" like my own hovering over them. Mine said, "Do you know where you are?"

"Yes," I said. "I think so."

"You're in the resuscitation ward. It's for people waking up."

"And the year is ten thousand?"

"Yes. That's what you asked for, isn't it?"

"And you speak English just like me?"

"We speak all your languages. Our own language is different. You'll learn everything at the Orientation Center."

"And my cancer?"

"You're clean. We've already taken care of that. We've also replaced your defective organs. You'll only be digitalized after the orientation period."

"Digitalized?"

"That will make you like the rest of us."

I was surprised that I could stand up so easily after nearly eight thousand years but she explained that they had treated my legs with one of their special substances. There were clothes on a chair, not mine but similar to what I was accustomed to wearing, so I put them on.

"Do you have a name?" I asked her.

"You can call me Jane," she said.

"Then you can call me Tarzan."

"What?"

A little later she handed me a few pills and I understood that this was in lieu of food. I also noted that I wasn't hungry, or thirsty either. Afterwards, at precisely the same moment, all the guides in the ward took their charges by the hand and led them out the door. I could now get a better look at the others. The Cryos, as I understood we were being called, looked at first glance like ordinary people, and none of them seemed the worse for wear. They might have been just getting up from an afternoon nap. It was clear, however, that not all of them came from my own time. For one thing, their outfits varied, apparently being the standard issue for their own periods, and, on closer inspection, some of them looked a little different too. I heard a few of them talking and was surprised to hear that it was perfect English, so I surmised that I was in an English-speaking group, the time differences notwithstanding.

We were taken to a large assembly hall and invited to find seats. Our guides stood along the sides of the hall with their arms crossed, staring into space. Right behind me there were two men dressed like me and also talking like me.

"Hey there," I said. "Americans? Twenty-first century?"

"You hit the nail right on the head," one of them said. "Nice to see you here."

"Nice to see you too," I said, and we introduced ourselves. They called themselves Jack and Bob. "I'm Frank," I said.

"Let's stick together," Jack said.

"You won't get any arguments from me," I said.

After a while, someone also looking like a guide came in. This one was male. He got up on the stage at the front end of the hall and stood behind a lectern, introducing himself as the Director of the Center. He spoke English too, in a neutral accent, like my guide, and wore the same kind of bodysuit. First he welcomed us. Then he commiserated with what he assumed was our confusion. Then he told us that we would have all our questions answered in our orientation groups. He was there to give us what he called "the big picture." I had to marvel at the way he used the language. He talked exactly like us.

"If you're interested in what transpired historywise while you were cryonized," he said, "you can take one of the – uh – smartphones in the bin by the door on your way out. We've uploaded some reading material for you. To whet your appetites, I can tell you that to date five billion human beings have been digitalized and another ten billion are waiting, either awake or asleep."

"Whoa, whoa," someone immediately shouted. "What do you mean – digitalized?"

"I mean," the Director said, "interfaced with the Central Unit." Here he held up his hand in what struck me as a very stiff gesture. "You'll have to read the material to get

the details. Everything is explained there in simpler language than I can muster. What I want to talk about are procedural matters and day-to-day routines. You are about to be integrated into a society totally different from the ones you knew. The transition has been designed to make things as easy as possible for you. You will continue your former way of life until you are psychologically ready to undergo complete integration. We're sorry we can't supply you with 'food' as you once knew it. 'Food' has not been produced for over six thousand years. But everything else will be pretty much the same. You'll find artifacts of your own civilizations and we'll provide you with leisure-time activities that you enjoyed in your former lives."

"What about ladies of the night?" someone else called out and a few of the others laughed or snickered.

The Director looked perplexed for a moment, until one of the guides standing on the side whispered in a very audible voice: "Whores." Then he nodded, which left the matter in doubt.

After the talk they took us to a kind of dormitory. We were walking in streets that looked pretty much like our own if maybe a little futuristic, as did the buildings, but when I looked up I saw a dome.

"Where's the sky?" I asked my guide.

"We live in a controlled environment. All habitats are domed."

"Domed or doomed?"

"Domed."

"Why's that?"

"To protect them from the heat. Otherwise everything would melt."

"Or burn?"

"There's nothing flammable here."

"Just us," I said.

The dormitory looked a little more hospitable than the resuscitation ward. In addition to beds we had shelves and closets and there was no medical equipment in sight. I sat down on my bed. My guide, "Jane," remained standing nearby. I still couldn't say for sure if she was human or a robot. I remembered that business about "whores" in the assembly hall.

"Do you really have a woman's body under that suit?" I said to her.

"You mean for sex," Jane said.

"Well, yes, if you put it that way." I felt rejuvenated in that way too, without an ache or pain and a very distinct feeling of hardness as I contemplated her.

"Do you feel you need it?" she said.

"Maybe."

"There's a division for that, but your wife is here too."

"Is she?" I said, and my voice almost broke. I confess that I had forgotten all about her in the excitement of the moment, but now I felt immense joy taking hold of me and felt like leaping into the air. "Is she really here?" I said again. "Is she? Is she really?"

"Yes," Jane said, "she's here."

"And she's all right?"

"Yes, she's all right."

"Can I see her?"

"Let's get you settled in first."

It turned out that I was in the 2000-2500 time group. That explained the differences in appearance among us. Everything seemed to have been thought out to the last detail. It stood to reason that the people here would know what they were doing if the

race had survived this long. After a while, I started to read the material on the smartphone, still thinking about my wife and determined to see her the next day whether anyone liked it or not.

The text told the story a thousand years at a time, though very briefly. If there had been any social and political scientists in the third millennium who had believed that radical social and political change was still possible to the same extent as in the second millennium, when such change had completely transformed the world, and that the old global powers would vanish and new ones take their place – they were completely mistaken. There had indeed been big wars, but contrary to what we had all once feared, they hardly made a dent in the way things were. Bombs and other means of mass destruction were undeniably the products of advanced technology, but Technology itself had other things on its mind. Space and Medicine were its frontiers. Human engineering was its passion.

The first breakthrough was the artificial organs, already coming into use in my own time. Everything became replaceable except the brain. That instantly neutralized a host of diseases, though not all of them. The end of disease came when they cracked the DNA code wide open and in effect could introduce any command they wished into the organism. For cancer, it was in effect: Abnormal cells, stop dividing! From here on in, genetic engineering became the rule, and before very long everything biologically undesirable in the human species was blotted out while human capabilities were dramatically enhanced, though it took some time to get used to the idea of made-to-order children. Not everyone wanted to have superbabies underfoot. Some were happy to let nature take its course, but that placed their children at a big disadvantage and widened the gap even further between those who had it all and those who got the short end of the stick. The social wars of the twenty-fourth century almost

tore the planet apart, claiming nearly three billion lives, or a quarter of the Earth's population under what had been strict enforcement of a global policy of zero population growth starting at the beginning of the twenty-second century. Far-reaching reforms were subsequently introduced that guaranteed minimal living conditions for all human beings, including those living in backward countries. There was now a very spirited movement for socialized world government but it died out soon enough and the weaker countries too regressed as the strongest again seized control of the world and reestablished what they called the natural order of things. The year three thousand was also celebrated in the old way, though champagne was no longer being marketed. Needless to say, printed books had become obsolete too, going all the way back to the twenty-second century. All printed matter was now available only electronically. Paradoxically, too, despite the enhancement of capabilities, the attention span of the average adult steadily declined, in inverse proportion to the manufacture of electronic gadgetry, finally reaching the level of an eight-year-old child.

The President of the United States made a long millennial speech about the American way of life. Apparently it was still alive and kicking. People were therefore beginning to understand that certain things were here to stay. America had rivals, to be sure, even powerful rivals, but somehow they got along. In all these developed countries, and most of the less developed ones too, people were completely locked into a proceduralized system that determined nearly every step they took. It was almost impossible to interact with the outside world except in a prescribed way. For most of their needs they interacted with what came to be called the Big Screen, which covered entire walls in their homes. Two evolutionary changes, apparently triggered by mutations and encouraged by the genetic engineers, had also begun to take hold in

this period. Human legs were becoming atrophied and the human thumb was becoming elongated. The advantage of the first, according to the social scientists, was that it tended to keep people immobile in front of their screens and therefore continuously engaged in what was considered productive and therefore remunerative activity. The advantage of the second was that it allowed people to manipulate their electronic devices with greater dexterity and therefore get more done in less time. These types therefore prevailed reproductively as well as economically, winning the best short-legged and long-thumbed mates and in the long run giving people a new if somewhat oddly gnomish look. Ultimately the thumb would become the longest human finger, measuring an average of nearly six inches.

The fourth millennium began with the introduction of domed, weather-controlled habitats as the Earth began to burn. This was followed by the end of agriculture and the universal introduction of artificial nutrients and then by the end of wildlife on the planet, including the birds in the air and the fish in the sea, though zoos and pets were still kept in the domed cities. Plant life too vanished from the face of the Earth at around this time, the remaining forests dying and the rivers drying up, leaving wastelands everywhere. The American President declared that it was a tribute to old-time American ingenuity and initiative that the destruction of the planet had not affected the American economy in the least, as the food industry instantly found new chemicals to replace the traces of natural foodstuffs still present in their products and free enterprisers found new ways to get people to buy what they didn't need or couldn't afford.

Space travel and space colonies naturally continued to flourish in this period. By the fifth millennium the human body had been partially robotized and the human brain partially digitalized, allowing computerized information to be continually and directly

downloaded and stored with the aid of miniaturized hardware and implanted electrodes. By the end of the seventh millennium the last giant step had been taken in the transformation of the human race when the human body became totally robotized and the human brain totally digitalized in an advanced model that made possible replication of individual consciousness and personality. This still mobile and entirely sentient individual continued to interface with the Central Unit, literally coming to know everything, including all spoken languages, without having to learn anything. Apparently this new society even had its own rebels – unkempt, hippielike creatures who walked around with cables dangling negligently from their heads like a forest of dreadlocks. The final phase, in the eighth millennium, saw the elimination of the robotized body altogether and the permanent housing of the fully digitalized brain in its own cell in the Central Unit itself, where it inhabited a universe no less real to it than ours was to us and could live a rich and rewarding eternal life as a new type of thinking organism. With death eliminated there was naturally no longer any need for birth and the remaining animals had vanished too. Now there finally was world government, or rather a Central Unit that regulated and supported all life. This was the story of human history that our hosts had chosen to tell us.

I can't say that I had expected any of this, or that it made me very happy. It seemed to confirm what my son had been saying about the future of the world, though I couldn't say that I really understood everything I had read. I still had many questions and hoped they would be clarified in the upcoming orientation sessions. I imagined that all of us had questions. I looked around for Jack and Bob but they were still reading so I decided not to disturb them. Instead I lay back on my bed and thought about my wife, pleased that she had kept her promise and had also opted for the year 10,000 wakeup call. I understood that men and women had been separated, at least for

the time being. Maybe these creatures understood us better than we understood ourselves. In any case, I looked forward to seeing her as much as I had looked forward to anything in my life, though I couldn't really say at this point what the future has in store for us.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *After coming across a few incidental lines mentioning cyronics in Philip Roth's American Pastoral, which I was rereading shortly after he died, I found myself drifting into sci-fi fantasy. The novel's vision of what the world will look like in its final phase is one that has always struck me as entirely feasible. My literary Influences are Dostoevsky, Proust, D. H. Lawrence, Mann, Kafka and Alain-Robbe-Grillet, though it was three great American social novelists (Dreiser, Dos Passos and Farrell) who inspired me to write as a teenager.*

BIO: *Fred Russell is the pen name of an American-born writer living in Israel. As Fred Russell he has published two other novels (Rafi's World and The Links in the Chain) as well as a collection called Aerial Views: Three Sci-Fi Satires. As Fred Skolnik, he has published three additional novels, as well as about 100 stories and essays. A collection of his short fiction called Americans & Other Stories was published by Fomite Press in 2017. He is also the editor in chief of the 22-volume 2nd edition of the Encyclopaedia Judaica, winner of the 2007 Dartmouth Medal.*