The frozen hive of her mind

A familiar face.

Deborah Walker

My sister came to my mother's funeral. She stood at the gates, watching my uncles carrying the coffin from the flower-lined hearse. A pale ghost, standing apart from the rest of the mourners. Rose looked exactly as I remembered her. I had not seen her for 12 years, but she had not aged. I touched my hand to my hair, streaked through with grey.

Terminal cancer does that, slowly pulling its victim towards its breast and swiping its vicious claws at the grieving family, bleeding the life of out them. I had sent word to Rose when my mother was first diagnosed.

She was late, too late.

When she tried to enter the church, Reverend Joyce stepped in front of her. He stood with his arms crossed at the threshold of the church. "Your kind will not enter here," he said.

Dad came to reason with him, and there was a scene. Reverend Joyce had always seemed such a tolerant man. It surprised me to see him spluttering with righteous hatred. Cold-lifers spark the most astonishing feelings of passion.

After the service, I had a quiet word with Rose and asked her not to attend the grave. I didn't want Dad upset, anymore than he had to be.

"I'll go straight to the Green Man," she said.

She remembered, then. My mother had enjoyed a drink and the Green Man had been her local for almost 30 years.

"You should have stayed away," I said to Rose. I'd picked her out a plate of food from the buffet. We sat outside the pub in the biting November wind. We were in a mildewed corner of the patio, hidden from the rest of the mourners inside the pub.

"She was my mother, Elise." Her speech was slow, as if she had to sort through multiple options before selecting the correct response. I didn't tell her that Mother hadn't mentioned her name for more than ten years.

My sister's face was pale. I knew that her blood surged with cryoprotectants: anti-nucleating proteins, polyols and glucose derivatives that allowed her body to maintain the state of unnatural coldness

that facilitated communication with the others of her lattice.

Our cousins, Alan and Sam, came outside lighting cigarettes. When they saw Rose, they stared. Sam looked away. Alan spat on the floor and muttered, "You cold bitch."

My voice was tight: "This is my mother's funeral."

Alan gave Rose one last look, nodded, and he and Sam both went back indoors.

Some people say that the cold-lifers are dead. That the spirit leaves the body when the heart stops beating. The programme had laser-cooled Rose to a point approaching absolute zero. I imagined her laid out on a stainless-steel slab with the 11 other volunteers, Bose-Einstein condensates forming throughout her body. Subatomic particles at extremely low temperatures act strangely. The condensates in Rose's body reached out and became entangled, linking Rose to the nascent lattice mind.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Most of us are in the observatory listening to the whispers from the Bowtie Nebula."

I nodded. The Bowtie Nebula was 5,000 light-years from Earth. It was the coldest natural place in the Universe.

Bose-Einstein condensates form in its heart. Cold-lifers can communicate with entangled particles, regardless of distance. Distance was meaningless to cold-lifers, I wondered if time was also meaningless to my sister.

"Are you cold, Rose?" I asked. I rubbed her fingers, trying to push a little warmth into them. "You feel cold."

I wanted to ask whether she was happy, but I couldn't find the words.

Taken to the point of extreme and slowly revived, the cold-lifers changed; their blood sang with odd substances; their cells reached out and grew in strange patterns.

I hoped that she would live long enough for the lattice minds to gain acceptance. As part of the hive mind, Rose was smarter than scientists on the programme could measure. The government could appreciate, though, the technological advances that the cold-lifers were bringing. We were, the government repeatedly told us, standing on the cusp of incredible change. Would the cold-lifers be accepted once the material advantages they generated filtered through to the real world? Would their strangeness be overlooked?

Today I laid my mother to rest. My sister was ten years older than me, but she would certainly outlive me. Perhaps this was at the heart of the hatred that the cold-lifers engendered. It was the hatred for those who might never die.

"It was good to see you, Elise." I had the impression that the words were merely rote. There was no emotion, no humanity behind them. I could see why they were hated.

She stood up and walked away. I thought that part of my sister still existed, in that strange frozen hive of her mind. She had looked outward, and felt pity. She had wanted to share this moment of loss with her drone-sister, who would not outlive the coming of the cold winter.

After a 20-year period of procrastination, Deborah Walker has started to write short stories, poetry and tweets. Find her science fiction in *M-BRANE SF*, *Warrior*, *Wisewoman II* and *DayBreak Magazine*. Join the discussion of Futures in Nature at go.nature.com/QMam2a

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