



RISING STARS

FIGHTING FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE AFTERLIFE



WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because this may be the new approach to aging.

By Zara Stone

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Legally, Cairn Idun’s husband died in Colorado in January 1992. But to her, his passing is a temporary state, lasting until technology advances enough to revive him. The day he left this world — for now — she watched as his body was placed in an ice bath to preserve his brain and traveled with his casket to the operating room where his blood was replaced with a glycerol solution. He now resides inside a nitrogen-filled steel thermos at Alcor, a cryonics facility in Scottsdale, Arizona. His was the first death that ever shook her. “The man who turned me on has temporarily been turned off,” she wrote in a blog post.

A few months later, she changed her name from Mary Margaret Glennie to Cairn Idun, her new first name signifying “something you can follow so you don’t get lost — and people can follow you forward.” She borrowed her last name from the Norse goddess of rejuvenation, Idun.

Idun’s version of eternal, or at least **extended**, life is cryonics, an increasingly popular movement being taken up by techno-futurists who believe that future tech can reanimate their cooled bodies. (Think Han Solo.) Today, 21st-century optimists who believe in new forms of resurrection see many ways to the Fountain of Youth, from corporeal returns to postmortem reawakenings, courtesy **artificial intelligence**. Though scientists are far from reaching any consensus on whether this might work, some of the biggest technological **thought leaders** of the age, from PayPal billionaire Peter Thiel to predictions prophet Ray Kurzweil, have helped bring it to the forefront of public discourse.

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DAVID STODOLSKY, SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGIST, IN THE *COGENT SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL*

Cryonicists are predominantly male, constituting 85 percent of the estimated 3,000 people who have cryonic memberships. Idun figures the divide is less about interest than exposure. The wage gap doesn’t help — an average cryonics package, which is usually paid via life insurance–esque annual payments, costs between \$30,000 and \$200,000. “The cryonics industry has adopted a strategy that implicitly targets atheist millionaires and alienates women,” wrote social psychologist David Stodolsky in the April 2016 *Cogent Social Sciences* journal.

Sixty-eight-year-old Idun, who doesn’t self-describe as a feminist, worries that women will end up excluded from one of the largest technological advancements of our time. So she created the Teens & Twenties Gathering in 2009, a yearly all-expenses-paid meet-up that aims to bring awareness about cryonics technology to young people who feel themselves far from death, especially women. Female attendance has grown to around 30 percent, she says; small, but respectable.

Idun also founded SWIVEL (Singles Week In Vegas for Extended Life) in 2015 as a way to demystify cryonics for women. The eight-day retreat took place in the Orleans hotel and casino, a Mardi Gras–themed resort with a Bourbon Street cabaret lounge and 2,600 slot, keno and poker machines. The program offered 50 percent off for female attendees, which included a New York real estate agent and an Arizona fitness trainer. A typical day involved group speakers, discussions and tours of the nearby Doomsday House, owned by the Society for the Preservation of Near Extinct Species.

Idun’s work is great news for cryonics businesspeople like Max More, CEO of Alcor Life Extension Foundation, who says youngsters blithely ignore death until it stares them in the face. Alcor’s annual fees range from \$80 to \$525 — reduced for students and under-18s; More equates these costs to a daily Starbucks habit. But dues are just the beginning — Alcor members commit to paying \$80,000 to \$200,000 for the procedure (some life insurances will cover this). Prices vary across providers, but the minimum is around \$30,000. Seventy-five percent of all life-insurance policy owners are 50 or older, according to LifeHealthPro; 22 percent are female.

Idun grew up in North Dakota, one of six children in a blue-collar Lutheran household. She refused confirmation, as she didn’t like the God she met in the Bible. “If he’s real, then he’s a bastard,” she told her father. As an adult she segued into libertarianism. When she discovered cryonics as a single woman in her mid-thirties, she signed up immediately — she wasn’t scared of death, but why go through something unnecessary?

It’s been almost 50 years since the first person went into cold storage — 73-year-old cancer-riddled California psychology professor James Bedford — and 17 years since *Futurama* introduced frozen pizza boy Fry into the future. Today, cryonics is ingrained in pop culture, from Tom Cruise in *Vanilla Sky* to the young-adult novel *I Was a Teenage Popsicle*. No one’s been revived so far.

But we’re getting closer. A Pittsburgh hospital’s been temporarily replacing patients’ blood with saline to prolong surgery time, a variant on the cryonics storage method, demonstrating that reanimation is possible. This year a rabbit’s brain was frozen and thawed to a near-perfect condition of its original cells and synapses. A gender shift, too, is on its way: Russian cryonic center KrioRus is helmed by flame-haired Valerija Pride; at least 33 percent of her patients are women. In 2015, 61-year-old female author Du Hong became the first publicly known cryogenically stored Chinese person.

Some say the gender disparity in cryonics is more about relationships than money. Psychotherapist Jeffrey Kauffman tells us, “Women [build] lives around relationships with others,” he says. And waking from a frozen state means entering a world where most

loved ones will have passed. But in Idun's case, romance and emotion are exactly what brought her to cryonics. If she's lucky, she'll have a happy end to her own love story before the century's out. She's waited 24 years so far.

SEE BEYOND

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