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DEEP FREEZE

Mark Selby is a drip. If you tell him anything, no matter how way out it is, he'll believe it. When he finds out it's a lie, he looks at you with hurt brown eyes, and then, believes the next load of rubbish you tell him. In the end we just stopped trying to string him along. There's not much fun in it when a bloke is too damn stupid to let the string go. Now we just ignore him most of the time.

We both work together in this rest home. You know what that means of course. My father was a gardener — he worked among the cabbages — there's not much difference really. This place is called Rest Haven. Oh well, I suppose they can call a loony bin by any name and the stink will be the same.

The whole business started when this girl was admitted around about June. Her name was Rosaleen, and was she a beauty, and I'm not talking about her looks. Screamed and went on every time anyone went near her. I was pretty lucky because I knew a chap who used to work at the hospital she came from. He gave me the drum. If you didn't want your ear-drums blasted out, you left the broom and a rag or two at the door and she'd clean the room herself. Well, that was all right with me. I'd leave the broom and toddle off to the linen room for a quiet smoke.

The doctors and nurses couldn't get near her either. If you glanced in as you passed the room, she'd be sitting on the floor, blonde hair neatly combed, and her eyes as big as saucers. She looked normal until you touched the door and the screaming started.

In August Mark came and told me that he'd like to take over cleaning Rosaleen's room. I was a bit put out, but if I'd made a fuss someone might have cottoned on to the linen room stunt, so I agreed. I knew it wouldn't last long anyway. No one wants to be in the same room as a fire engine for long, and her siren screams would make anyone lose enthusiasm.

It was a week or so before I woke up to what was going on. I was down at the end of the corridor one morning, when I saw him at the door to her room. He had a broom and the other cleaning things and he was knocking at the door. Well I ask you — What the Hell? — They're all loonies anyway. After a second he took out his key and unlocked it. I sat back and waited for the screams. Dead silence! I tiptoed down the corridor and looked in. She was sitting on the bed and he was mopping. They weren't talking of course — Rosaleen couldn't. But the next thing they are both laughing. Then she looked up and saw me. She opened her mouth wide. I knew what was coming and I took off down the corridor with the screams following on behind.

That night I ran into Doc. Roper in the ward kitchenette. I couldn't

resist telling him about Mark and the girl. He didn't believe me at first and I had him almost convinced when Mark came in.

The Doc. said, "I hear you clean Rosaleen's room now, Selby."

Mark said that he did and when the Doc. wanted to know why he said, "She's a nice kid. We get on, see?"

"How can anyone get on with someone who won't or can't talk and screams whenever anyone goes near her?"

"She's just a bit frightened. She tells me stories."

"What sort of stories?"

"Just stories."

"What sort of stories?" and when Mark didn't answer he went on, "Come on man. What sort of stories?"

Doc. was sounding pretty irritable and Mark was standing there shuffling his feet.

"If you two think that you can stand there and tell me a load of guff like this, you'd better think again."

"She told me about Bill here. You know in the linen room."

"How the Hell did she know about that?" I realized I'd put my big fat foot in it when I saw the Doc.'s face.

I started to explain about Rosaleen doing her own room but the Doc. had had enough, so in the end I shut up, finished my coffee and left.

The whole stupid thing had backfired and I just couldn't make out how that twit, Selby, had cottoned on to the linen room. I'm pretty careful. You know, the butt and match in my pocket and the door left open to clear the smoke. The oddest part of the whole thing was that that was the first time I'd ever known Selby to tell anything but the literal truth. Maybe the dope was waking up and was getting his own back.

I watched Mark pretty carefully after that, and it wasn't long before I noticed that Doc. Roper was keeping an eye on him too. At about the time Mark did Rosaleen's room the Doc. would be somewhere nearby, or in the corridor.

A few days later there was a television camera set up on the top of the door, through the one way glass. A bit later I found the receiver in the Doc.'s office. I turned it on. There was Rosaleen sitting on the side of her bed reading a book. I heard a noise in the corridor and flicked it off, and then I realized what I'd seen. I was just going to turn it on again when Doc. Roper came in.

"What the Hell are you doing in here?"

"I was looking for the receiver. I turned it on, Doc. She was sitting there reading a book."

"Don't talk rot." He turned on the receiver and there she was. Just then Rosaleen sat up straight. The book fell to the floor, her face went stiff with fear. The door opened and one of the nurses walked in. Rosaleen's mouth opened and we could see the soundless scream. Doc. Roper switched the set off.

"See if you can find Selby."

I didn't wait to argue. I knew where I'd find Mark all right. He was just due to start the rooms to B Block.

When we got back to the office the Doc. had the screen switched on again.

He glanced up. "Did you give her the book, Selby?"

"Yes, Sir, she asked me."

"I won't be needing you any longer." He looked at me.

I thought of arguing the toss, but when he's got that look in his eye there isn't much point. I went.

Half an hour later one of the nurses came and saw me.

"Matron said, would you do Mark's block after you've finished here. He's got something else to do."

I was still working at four when I should have been off duty. By the time I got to the dining room, dinner was half over and Mark wasn't there. I looked in his room and then asked a few people. No one had seen him so finally I gave up and went to the pictures.

I didn't sleep well that night thinking about things. None of it made sense. Here was a girl who wasn't supposed to be able to talk, let alone read, and a dope like Mark getting all the attention. He must be lying, I thought, but it would be the first time that the dope had managed to get onto a good thing like this, so perhaps I shouldn't blame him.

Next morning, when most of the staff were busy in the wards, I went up to the Sister's desk and found Rosaleen's file. After I'd ploughed through the medical guff it boiled down to this. She was illegitimate and had been adopted at about two weeks old. They'd brought her back about twelve months later — she was uncontrollable. Since then she'd been in one hospital after another. There had been a nurse that could do something with her at one place, but she had left and Rosaleen was worse than ever. She'd had no teaching at any time, but if left alone would look after herself reasonably well. She was quiet and tractable as long as she was left alone. Now it seemed that the Great Selby had got through to her.

I got landed with all Mark's work that day. I didn't have time to look sideways, but I did notice that a microphone had joined the camera at the door of Rosaleen's room.

Later in the week I was doing the rooms in that wing when I saw Doc. standing around in the corridor. A few minutes later Selby arrived.

"You wanted me, Sir?"

"Yes, I want to talk to Rose."

"She's frightened."

"She's got nothing to fear from me."

"I know that, Sir, but she doesn't."

They both walked off down the corridor. I flipped the broom around the room and piled the debris into the corner and raced round to the Doc.'s office.

One of the nurses was there watching the screen. She turned when I came in and pointed to the door, but I'd managed to get a look at the

screen. Mark was there with his arm around her waist. He was talking to her but I only caught a few words. "All right — it will be all right."

I was getting pretty fed up by the end of the week. To hear some of the nurses talk, Mark Selby was the hero of the hospital. I was doing all his work while the great psychiatrist played doctors to a little twit that was as mad as a meat axe.

I decided to do something about it. No nutty dame was going to rule the roost around here and leave me with all the work. I'm no slouch with the ladies and if Mark could suck up to her it should be a breeze for me. I'd make a big hit with her and then I could play wet nurse while Mark did a bit of work for a change.

First I checked on the set in the Doc.'s room. She was sitting on the side of her bed, combing her hair. That gave me an idea. I went over to the quarters and rescued a hair-clip that one of my admirers had left behind. I found a bit of tissue paper and wrapped it up and shoved it in my pocket.

There was no one about when I got back. Feeling like a fool I knocked on the door and then opened it. She was just sitting there. For a second I thought she was going to start screaming again, but I got in first.

"I've brought you a present."

I took the parcel out and held it out. It would look nice in her hair I thought, just what she needed.

Her hands went to her hair and pushed it up into the style I'd been imagining. She hadn't even opened the parcel. It clicked then. The little bitch must have been reading my mind. It fitted — the linen room, the lot.

I didn't think. I back handed her across the room. She lay on the floor whimpering and mewling like a cat. I lifted my boot, but she was rolled up into a tight ball. I left her there, and that night I went out and got a skin full. God alone knows what Mark and the Doc. had been playing about with.

Mark is back on the floor, doing his share of the work — not before time either. The girl — well it seems that the experiment with her failed. Not that some good didn't come out of the whole nasty business. Now anyone can go into her room any time they please. She lies in the bed curled up into that little ball. No fuss, no bother. Catatonic the Doc. calls it.

Sometimes I wonder if . . . but Hell! They're just a bunch of loonies and we're the gardeners. Even gardeners need their privacy, don't they?