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INSIDE JOHN BARTH

By WILLIAM W. STUART

Every man wants to see a Garden of Eden. John Barth agreed with his whole heart—he knew that he'd rather see than be one!

Illustrated by DILLON

A man moving forward while encompassed by small, flying insect-type creatures.

I

TAKE a fellow, reasonably young, personable enough, health perfect. Suppose he has all the money he can reasonably, or even unreasonably, use. He is successful in a number of different fields of work in which he is interested. Certainly he has security. Women? Well, maybe not any woman in the world he might want. But still, a very nice, choice selection of a number of the very finest physical specimens. The finest—and no acute case of puritanism to inhibit his enjoyment.

Take all that. Then add to it the positive assurance of continuing youth and vigor, with a solid life expectancy of from 175 to 200 more years. Impossible? Well—just suppose it were all true of someone. A man like that, a man with all those things going for him, you'd figure he would be the happiest man in the world.

Wouldn't you?

Sure. A man with all that would have to be the happiest—unless he was crazy. Right? But me, Johnny Barth, I had it.

I had all of it, just like that. I sure wasn't the happiest man in the world though. And I know I wasn't crazy either. The thing about me was, I wasn't a man. Not exactly.

I was a colony.

Really. A colony. A settlement. A new but flourishing culture, you might say. Oh, I had the look of a man, and the mind and the nerves and the feel of a man too. All the normal parts and equipment. But all of it existed—and was beautifully kept up, I'll say that—primarily as a locale, not a man.

I was, as I said before, a colony.

Sometimes I used to wonder how New England really felt about the Pilgrims. If you think that sounds silly—perhaps one of these days you won't.

THE beginning was some ten years back, on a hunting trip the autumn after I got out of college. That was just before I started working, as far off the bottom as I could talk myself, which was the personnel office in my Uncle John's dry cleaning chain in the city.

That wasn't too bad. But I was number four man in the office, so it could have been better, too. Uncle John was a bachelor, which meant he had no daughter I could marry. Anyway, she would have been my cousin. But next best, I figured, was to be on good personal terms with the old bull.

This wasn't too hard. Apart from expecting rising young executives to rise and start work no later than 8:30 a.m., Uncle John was more or less all right. Humor him? Well, every fall he liked to go hunting. So when he asked me to go hunting with him up in the Great Sentries, I knew I was getting along pretty well. I went hunting.

The trip was nothing very much. We camped up in the hills. We drank a reasonably good bourbon. We hunted—if that's the word for it. Me, I'd done my hitch in the Army. I know what a gun is—and respect it. Uncle John provided our hunting excitement by turning out to be one of the trigger-happy types. His score was two cows, a goat, a couple of other hunters, one possible deer—and unnumbered shrubs and bushes shot *at*. Luckily he was such a lousy shot that the safest things in the mountains were his targets.

Well, no matter. I tried to stay in the second safest place, which was directly behind him. So it was a nice enough trip with no casualties, right up to the last night.

We were all set to pack out in the morning when it happened. Maybe you read about the thing at the time. It got a light-hearted play in the papers, the way those things do. "A one in a billion accident," they called it.

We were lounging by the campfire after supper and a few good snorts. Uncle John was entertaining himself with a review of some of his nearer, more thrilling misses. I, to tell the truth, was sort of dozing off.

Then, all of a sudden, there was a bright flash of blue-green light and a loud sort of a "zoop-zing" sound. And a sharp, stinging sensation in my thighs.

I hollered. I jumped to my feet. I looked down, and my pants were peppered with about a dozen little holes like buckshot. I didn't have to drop my pants to know my legs were too. I could feel it. And blood started to ooze.

I figured, of course, that Uncle John had finally shot me and I at once looked on the bright side. I would be a cinch for a fast promotion to vice president. But Uncle John swore he hadn't been near a gun. So we guessed some other hunter must have done it, seen what he had done and then prudently ducked. At least no one stepped forward.

IT was a moonlight night. With Uncle John helping me we made it the two and a half miles back down the trail to Poxville, where we'd left our car and stuff. We routed out the only doctor in the area, old Doc Grandy.

He grumbled, "Hell, boy, a few little hunks o' buckshot like that and you make such a holler. I see a dozen twice's bad as this ever' season. Ought to make you wait till office hours. Well—hike yourself up on the table there. I'll flip 'em out for you."

Which he proceeded to do. If it was a joke to him, it sure wasn't to me, even if they weren't in very deep. Finally he was done. He stood there clucking like an old hen with no family but a brass doorknob. Something didn't seem quite right to him.

Uncle John gave me a good belt of the bourbon he'd been thoughtful enough to pack along.

"What was it you say hit you, boy?" Doc Grandy wanted to know, reaching absently for the bottle.

"Buckshot, I suppose. What was it you just hacked out of me?"

"Hah!" He passed the bottle back to Uncle John. "Not like any buckshot I ever saw. Little balls, or shells of metallic stuff all right. But not lead. Peculiar. M-mph. You know what, boy?"

"You're mighty liberal with the iodine, I know that. What else?"

"You say you saw a big flash of light. Come to think on it, I saw a streak of light up the mountainside about that same time. I was out on the porch. You know, boy, I believe you got something to feel right set up about. I believe you been hit by a meteor. If it weren't—ha-ha—pieces of one of them flying saucers you read about."

Well, I didn't feel so set up about it, then or ever. But it did turn out he was right.

Doc Grandy got a science professor from Eastern State Teachers College there in Poxville to come look. He agreed that they were meteor fragments. The two of them phoned it in to the city papers during a slow week and, all in all, it was a big thing. To them. To me it was nothing much but a pain in the rear.

The meteor, interviewed scientists were quoted as saying, must have almost burned up coming through the atmosphere, and disintegrated just before it hit me. Otherwise I'd have been killed. The Poxville professor got very long-winded about the peculiar shape and composition of the pieces, and finally carried off all but one for the college museum. Most likely they're still there. One I kept as a souvenir, which was silly. It wasn't a thing I wanted to remember—or, as I found later, would ever be able to forget. Anyway, I lost it.

All right. That was that and, except for a lingering need to sit on very soft cushions, the end of it. I thought. We went back to town.

Uncle John felt almost as guilty about the whole thing as if he had shot me himself and, in November, when he found about old Bert Winginheimer interviewing girl applicants for checker jobs at home in his apartment, I got a nice promotion.

WORKING my way up, I was a happy, successful businessman.

And then, not all at once but gradually, a lot of little things developed into problems. They weren't really problems either, exactly. They were puzzles. Nothing big but—well, it was like I was sort of being made to do, or not do, certain things. Like being pushed in one direction or another. And not necessarily the direction I personally would have picked. Like——

Well, one thing was shaving.

I always had used an ordinary safety razor—nicked myself not more than average. It seemed OK to me. Never cared too much for electric razors; it didn't seem to me they shaved as close. But—I took to using an electric razor now, because I had to.

One workday morning I dragged myself to the bathroom of my bachelor apartment to wash and shave. Getting started in the morning was never a pleasure to me. But this time seemed somehow tougher than usual. I lathered my face and put a fresh blade in my old razor.

For some reason, I could barely force myself to start. "Come on, Johnny boy!" I told myself. "Let's go!" I made myself take a first stroke with the razor. Man! It burned like fire. I started another stroke and the burning came before the razor even touched my face. I had to give up. I went down to the office without a shave.

That was no good, of course, so at the coffee break I forced myself around the corner to the barber shop. Same thing! I got all lathered up all right, holding myself by force in the chair. But, before the barber could touch the razor to my face, the burning started again.

I stopped him. I couldn't take it.

And then suddenly the idea came to me that an electric razor would be the solution. It wasn't, actually, just an idea; it was positive knowledge. Somehow I knew an electric razor would do it. I picked one up at the drug store around the corner and took it to the office. Plugged the thing in and went to work. It was fine, as I had known it would be. As close a shave? Well, no. But at least it was a shave.

Another thing was my approach to—or retreat from—drinking. Not that I ever was a real rummy, but I hadn't been one to drag my feet at a party. Now I got so moderate it hardly seemed worth bothering with at all. I could only take three or four drinks, and that only about once a week. The first time I had that feeling I should quit after four, I tried just one—or two—more. At the first sip of number five, I thought the top of my head would blast off. Four was the limit. Rigidly enforced.

All that winter, things like that kept coming up. I couldn't drink more than so much coffee. Had to take it easy on smoking. Gave up ice skating—all of a sudden the cold bothered me. Stay up late nights and chase around? No more; I could hardly hold my eyes open after ten.

That's the way it went.

I had these feelings, compulsions actually. I couldn't control them. I couldn't go against them. If I did, I would suffer for it.

True, I had to admit that probably all these things were really good for me. But it got to where everything I did was something that was good for me—and that was bad. Hell, it isn't natural for a young fellow just out of college to live like a fussy old man of seventy with a grudge against the undertaker. Life became very dull!

About the only thing I could say for it was, I was sure healthy.

It was the first winter since I could remember that I never caught a cold. A cold? I never once sniffled. My health was perfect; never even so much as a pimple. My dandruff and athlete's foot disappeared. I had a wonderful appetite—which was lucky, since I didn't have much other recreation left. And I didn't even gain weight!

Well, those things were nice enough, true. But were they compensation for the life I was being forced to live? Answer: Uh-uh. I couldn't imagine what was wrong with me.

Of course, as it turned out the following spring, I didn't have to imagine it. I was told.

II

IT was a Friday. After work I stopped by Perry's Place with Fred Schingle and Burk Walters from the main accounting office. I was hoping it would turn out to be one of my nights to have a couple—but no. I got the message and sat there, more or less sulking, in my half of the booth.

Fred and Burk got to arguing about flying saucers. Fred said yes; Burk, no. I stirred my coffee and sat in a neutral corner.

"Now look here," said Burk, "you say people have seen things. All right. Maybe some of them have seen things—weather balloons, shadows, meteors maybe. But space ships? Nonsense."

"No nonsense at all. I've seen pictures. And some of the reports are from airline pilots and people like that, who are not fooled by balloons or meteors. They have seen ships, I tell you, ships from outer space. And they are observing us."

"Drivel!"

"It is not!"

"It's drivel. Now look, Fred. You too, Johnny, if you're awake over there. How long have they been reporting these things? For years. Ever since World War II.

"All right. Ever since the war, at least. So. Suppose they were space ships? Whoever was in them must be way ahead of us technically. So why don't they land? Why don't they approach us?"

Fred shrugged. "How would I know? They probably have their reasons. Maybe they figure we aren't worth any closer contact."

"Hah! Nonsense. The reason we don't see these space people, Fred my boy, admit it, is because there aren't any. And you know it!"

"I don't know anything of the damned sort. For all any of us know, they might even be all around us right now."

Burk laughed. I smiled, a little sourly, and drained my coffee.

I felt a little warning twinge.

Too much coffee; should have taken milk. I excused myself as the other two ordered up another round.

I left. The conversation was too stupid to listen to. Space creatures all around me, of all things. How wrong can a man get? There weren't any invaders from space all around me.

I was all around them.

ALL at once, standing there on the sidewalk outside Perry's Bar, I knew that it was true. Space invaders. The Earth was invaded—the Earth, hell! *I* was invaded. I didn't know how I knew, but I knew all right. I should have. I was in possession of all the information.

I took a cab home to my apartment.

I was upset. I had a right to be upset and I wanted to be alone. Alone? That was a joke!

Well, my cab pulled up in front of my very modest place. I paid the driver, overtipped him—I was really upset—and ran up the stairs. In the apartment, I hustled to the two by four kitchen and, with unshakable determination, I poured myself a four-finger snort of scotch.

Then I groaned and poured it down the sink. Unshakable determination is all very well—but when the top of your head seems to rip loose like a piece of stubborn adhesive coming off a hairy chest and bounces, hard, against the ceiling, then all you can do is give up. I stumbled out to the front room and slumped down in my easy chair to think.

I'd left the door open and I was sitting in a draft.

So I had to—that compulsion—go close the door. *Then* I sat down to think.

Anyway I *thought* I sat down to think. But, suddenly, my thoughts were not my own.

I wasn't producing them; I was receiving them.

"Barth! Oh, Land of Barth. Do you read us, oh Barthland? Do you read us?"

I didn't hear that, you understand. It wasn't a voice. It was all thoughts inside my head. But to me they came in terms of words.

I took it calmly. Surprisingly, I was no longer upset—which, as I think it over, was probably more an achievement of internal engineering than personal stability.

"Yeah," I said, "I read you. So who in hell—" a poor choice of expression—"are you? What are you doing here? Answer me that." I didn't have to say it, the thought would have been enough. I knew that. But it made me feel better to speak out.

"We are Barthians, of course. We are your people. We live here."

"Well, you're trespassing on private property! Get out, you hear me? Get out!"

"Now, now, noble Fatherland. Please, do not become upset and unreasonable. We honor you greatly as our home and country. Surely we who were born and raised here have our rights. True, our forefathers who made the great voyage through space settled first here in a frightful wilderness some four generations back. But we are neither pioneers nor immigrants. We are citizens born."

"Invaders! Squatters!"

"Citizens of Barthland."

"Invaded! Good Lord, of all the people in the world, why me? Nothing like this ever happened to anyone. Why did I have to be picked to be a territory—the first man to have queer things living in me?"

"Oh, please, gracious Fatherland! Permit us to correct you. In the day of our fathers, conditions were, we can assure you, chaotic. Many horrible things lived here. Wild beasts and plant growths of the most vicious types were everywhere."

"There were——?"

"What you would call microbes. Bacteria. Fungi. Viruses. Terrible devouring wild creatures everywhere. You were a howling wilderness. Of course, we have cleaned those things up now. Today you are civilized—a fine, healthy individual of your species—and our revered Fatherland. Surely you have noted the vast improvement in your condition!"

"Yes, but——"

"And we pledge our lives to you, oh Barthland. As patriotic citizens we will defend you to the death. We promise you will never be successfully invaded."

Yeah. Well, that was nice. But already I felt as crowded as a subway train with the power cut out at rush hour.

But there was no room for doubt either. I'd had it. I still did have it; had no chance at all of getting rid of it.

THEY went on then and told me their story.

I won't try to repeat it all verbatim. I couldn't now, since my memory—but that's something else. Anyway, I finally got the picture.

But I didn't get it all the same evening. Oh, no. At ten I had to knock it off to go to bed, get my sleep, keep up my health. They were insistent.

As they put it, even if I didn't care for myself I had to think about an entire population and generations yet unborn. Or unbudded, which was the way they did it.

Well, as they said, we had the whole weekend to work out an understanding. Which we did. When we were through, I didn't like it a whole lot better, but at least I could understand it.

It was all a perfectly logical proposition from their point of view—which differed in quite a number of respects from my own. To them it was simply a matter of survival for their race and their culture. To me it was a matter of who or what I was going to be. But then, I had no choice.

According to the Official History I was given, they came from a tiny planet of a small sun. Actually, their sun was itself a planet, still incandescent, distant perhaps like Jupiter from the true sun. Their planet or moon was tiny, wet and warm. And the temperature was constant.

These conditions, naturally, governed their development—and, eventually, mine.

A man, looking forward, half dark and half light.

Of course they were very small, about the size of a dysentery amoeba. The individual life span was short as compared to ours but the accelerated pace of their lives balanced it out. In the beginning, something like four of our days was a lifetime. So they lived, grew, developed, evolved. They learned to communicate. They became civilized—far more so than we have, according to them. And I guess that was true. They were even able to extend their life span to something like two months.

"And to what," I inquired—but without much fire, I'm afraid; I was losing fight—"to what am I indebted for this intrusion?"

"Necessity."

It was, to them. Their sun had begun to cool. It was their eviction notice.

They had to move or adapt themselves to immeasurably harsher conditions; and they had become so highly developed, so specialized, that change of that sort would have been difficult if not impossible. And they didn't want to change, anyway. They liked themselves as they were.

The only other thing was to escape. They had to work for flight through space. And they succeeded.

There were planets nearer to them than Earth. But these were enormous worlds to them, and the conditions were intolerably harsh. They found one planet with conditions much like those on Earth a few million years back. It was a jungle world, dominated by giant reptiles—which were of no use to the folk. But there were a few, small, struggling, warm-blooded animals. Small to us, that is—they were county size to the folk.

Some genius had a great inspiration. While the environment of the planet itself was impossibly harsh and hostile, the conditions *inside* these warm little animals were highly suitable!

It seemed to be the solution to their problem of survival. Small, trial colonies were established. Communication with the space ships from home was achieved.

The experiment was a success.

THE trouble was that each colony's existence depended on the life of the host. When the animal died, the colony died.

Life on the planet was savage. New colonies would, of course, be passed from individual to individual and generation to generation of the host species. But the inevitable toll of attrition from the violent deaths of the animals appalled this gentle race. And there was nothing they could do about it. They could give protection against disease, but they could not control the hosts. Their scientists figured that, if they could find a form of life having conscious power of reason, they would be able to establish communication and a measure of control. But it was not possible where only instinct existed.

They went ahead because they had no choice. Their only chance was to establish their colonies, accepting the certainty of the slaughter of hundreds upon hundreds of entire communities—and hoping that, with their help, evolution on the planet would eventually produce a better host organism. Even of this they were by no means sure. It was a hope. For all they could know, the struggling mammalian life might well be doomed to extermination by the giant reptiles.

They took the gamble. Hundreds of colonies were planted.

They did it but they weren't satisfied with it. So, back on the dying home moon, survivors continued to work. Before the end came they made one more desperate bid for race survival.

They built interstellar ships to be launched on possibly endless journeys into space. A nucleus of select individuals in a spore-like form of suspended animation was placed on each ship. Ships were launched in pairs, with automatic controls to be activated when they entered into the radius of attraction of a sun. Should the sun have planets such as their own home world—or Earth type—the ships would be guided there. In the case of an Earth type planet having intelligent life, they would——

They would do just what my damned "meteor" had done.

They would home in on an individual, "explode," penetrate—and set up heavy housekeeping on a permanent basis. They did. Lovely. Oh, joy!

Well. We would all like to see the Garden of Eden; but being it is something quite else again.

Me, a colony!

My—uh—population had no idea where they were in relation to their original home, or how long they had traveled through space. They did hope that someplace on Earth their companion ship had established another settlement. But they didn't know. So far on our world, with its masses of powerful electrical impulses, plus those of our own brains, they had found distance communication impossible.

"Well, look, fellows," I said. "Look here now. This is a noble, inspiring story. The heroic struggle of your—uh—people to survive, overcoming all odds and stuff, it's wonderful! And I admire you for it, indeed I do. But—what about me?"

"You, Great Land of Barth, are our beloved home and fatherland for many, many generations to come. You are the mighty base from which we can spread over this enormous planet."

"That's you. What I mean is, what about *me*?"

"Oh? But there is no conflict. Your interests are our interests."

That was how they looked at it. Sincerely. As they said, they weren't ruthless conquerors. They only wanted to get along.

AND all they wanted for me were such fine things as good health, long life, contentment. Contentment, sure. Continued irritation—a sour disposition resulting in excess flow of bile—did not provide just the sort of environment in which they cared to bring up the kiddies. Smoking? No. It wasn't healthy. Alcohol? Well, they were willing to declare a national holiday now and then. Within reason.

Which, as I already knew, meant two to four shots once or twice a week.

SEX? Themselves, they didn't have any. "But," they told me with an attitude of broad tolerance, "we want to be fair. We will not interfere with you in this matter—other than to assist you in the use of sound judgment in the selection of a partner."

But I shouldn't feel that any of this was in any way real restrictive. It was merely practical common sense.

For observing it I would get their valuable advice and assistance in all phases of my life. I would enjoy—or have, anyway—perfect health. My life, if that's what it was, would be extended by better than 100 years. "You are fortunate," they pointed out, a little smugly I thought, "that we, unlike your race, are conservationists in the truest sense. Far from despoiling our homeland and laying waste its resources and natural scenic wonders, we will improve it."

I had to be careful because, as they explained it, even a small nick with a razor might wipe out an entire suburban family.

"But fellows! I want to live my own life."

"Come now. Please remember that you are not alone now."

"Aw, fellows. Look, I'll get a dog, lots of dogs—fine purebreds, not mongrels like me. The finest. I'll pamper them. They'll live like kings.... Wouldn't you consider moving?"

"Out of the question."

"An elephant then? Think of the space, the room for the kids to play——"

"Never."

"Damn it! Take me to—no, I mean let me talk to your leader."

That got me no place. It seemed I was already talking to their highest government councils. All of my suggestions were considered, debated, voted on —and rejected.

They were democratic, they said. They counted my vote in favor; but that was just one vote. Rather a small minority.

As I suppose I should have figured, my thoughts were coming through over a period that was, to them, equal to weeks. They recorded them, accelerated them, broadcast them all around, held elections and recorded replies to be played back to me at my own slow tempo by the time I had a new thought ready. No, they wouldn't take time to let me count the votes. And there is where you might say I lost my self control.

"Damn it!" I said. Or shouted. "I won't have it! I won't put up with it. I'll—uh—I'll get us all dead drunk. I'll take dope! I'll go out and get a shot of penicillin and

—"

I didn't do a damned thing. I couldn't.

Their control of my actions was just as complete as they wanted to make it. While they didn't exercise it all the time, they made the rules. According to them, they could have controlled my thoughts too if they had wanted to. They didn't because they felt that wouldn't be democratic. Actually, I suppose they were pretty fair and reasonable—from their point of view. Certainly it could have been a lot worse.

III

I WASN'T as bad off as old Faust and his deal with the devil. My soul was still my own. But my body was community property—and I couldn't, by God, so much as bite my own tongue without feeling like a bloody murderer—and being made to suffer for it, too.

Perhaps you don't think biting your tongue is any great privilege to have to give up. Maybe not. But, no matter how you figure, you've got to admit the situation was—well—confining.

And it lasted for over nine years.

Nine miserable years of semi-slavery? Well, no. I couldn't honestly say that it was that bad. There were all the restrictions and limitations, but also there was my perfect health; and what you might call a sort of a sense of inner well-being. Added to that, there was my sensationally successful career. And the money.

All at once, almost anything I undertook to do was sensationally successful. I wrote, in several different styles and fields and under a number of different names; I was terrific. My painting was the talk of the art world. "Superb," said the critics. "An astonishing other-worldly quality." How right they were—even if they didn't know why. I patented a few little inventions, just for fun; and I invested. The money poured in so fast I couldn't count it. I hired people to count it, and to help guide it through the tax loopholes—although there I was able to give them a few sneaky little ideas that even our sharpest tax lawyers hadn't worked out.

Of course the catch in all that was that, actually, I was not so much a rich, brilliant, successful man. I was a booming, prosperous nation.

The satisfaction I could take in all my success was limited by my knowledge that it was a group effort. How could I help being successful? I had a very fair part of the resources of a society substantially ahead of our own working for me. As for knowledge of our world, they didn't just know everything I did. They knew everything I ever had known—or seen, heard, read, dreamed or thought of. They could dig up anything, explore it, expand it and use it in ways I couldn't have worked out in a thousand years. Sure, I was successful. I did stay out of sports—too dangerous; entertainment—didn't lend itself too well to the group approach; and music—they had never developed or used sound, and we agreed not to go into it. As I figured it, music in the soul may be very beautiful; but a full-size symphony in a sinus I could do without.

So I had success. And there was another thing I had too. Company.

Privacy? No, I had less privacy than any man who ever lived, although I admit that my people, as long as I obeyed the rules, were never pushy or intrusive. They didn't come barging into my thoughts unless I invited them. But they were always ready. And if those nine years were less than perfect, at least I was never lonesome. Success, with me, was not a lonely thing.

And there were women.

Yes, there were women. And finally, at the end of it, there was a woman—and that was it.

AS they had explained it, they were prepared to be tolerant about my—ah—relations with women as long as I was "reasonable" in my selection. Come to find out, they were prepared to be not just tolerant but insistent—and very selective.

First there was Helga.

Helga was Uncle John's secretary, a great big, healthy, rosy-cheeked, blonde Swedish girl, terrific if you liked the type. Me, I hadn't ever made a move in her direction, partly because she was so close to Uncle John, but mostly because my tastes always ran to the smaller types. But tastes can be changed.

Ten days after that first conversation with my people I'd already cleared something like $50,000 in a few speculations in the commodity market. I was feeling a little moody in spite of it, and I decided to quit my job. So I went up that afternoon to Uncle John's office to tell him.

Uncle John was out. Helga was in. There she was, five foot eleven of big, bouncy, blonde smorgasbord. Wow! Before, I'd seen Helga a hundred times, looked with mild admiration but not one real ripple inside. And now, all at once, wow! That was my people, of course, manipulating glands, thoughts, feelings. "Wow!" it was.

First things first. "Helga, Doll! Ah! Where's Uncle John?"

"Johnny! That's the first time you ever called me—hm-m—Mr. Barth has gone for the day ... Johnny."

She hadn't even looked at me before. My—uh—government was growing more powerful. It was establishing outside spheres of influence. Of course, at the time, I didn't take the trouble to analyze the situation; I just went to work on it.

As they say, it is nice work if you can get it.

I could get it.

It was a good thing Uncle John didn't come bustling back after something he'd forgotten that afternoon.

I didn't get around to quitting my job that afternoon. Later on that evening, I took her home. She wanted me to come in and meet her parents, yet! But I begged off that—and then she came up with a snapper. "But we will be married, Johnny darling. Won't we? Real soon!"

"Uh," I said, making a quick mental plane reservation for Rio, "sure, Doll. Sure we will." I broke away right quick after that. There was a problem I wanted to get a little advice on.

What I did get, actually, was a nasty shock.

Back in my apartment—my big, new, plush apartment—I sat down to go over the thing with the Department of the Interior. The enthusiastic response I got surprised me. "Magnificent," was the word. "Superb. Great!"

Well, I thought myself that I had turned in a pretty outstanding performance, but I hadn't expected such applause. "It is a first step, a splendid beginning! A fully equipped, well-armed expedition will have the place settled, under cultivation and reasonably civilized inside of a day or two, your time. It will be simple for them. So much more so than in your case—since we now know precisely what to expect."

I WAS truly shocked. I felt guilty. "No!" I said. "Oh, no! What a thing to do. You *can't*!"

"Now, now. Gently," they said. "What, after all, oh Fatherland, might be the perfectly natural consequences of your own act?"

"What? You mean under other—that is——"

"Exactly. You could very well have implanted a new life in her, which is all that we have done. Why should our doing so disturb you?"

Well, it did disturb me. But then, as they pointed out, they could have developed less pleasant methods of spreading colonies. They had merely decided that this approach would be the surest and simplest.

"Well, maybe," I told them, "but it still seems kind of sneaky to me. Besides, if you'd left it to me, I'd certainly never have picked a great big ox like Helga. And now she says she's going to marry me, too!"

"You do not wish this? We understand. Do not be concerned. We will—ah—send instructions to our people the next time. She will change her feelings about this."

She dropped the marriage bit completely.

We had what you might call an idyllic association, in spite of her being such a big, husky model—a fact which never bothered me when I was with her. "She is happy," I was assured, "very happy." She seemed pleased and contented enough, even if she developed, I thought, a sort of an inward look about her. She and I never discussed our—uh—people. We had a fast whirl for a couple of weeks. And then I'd quit my job with Uncle John, and we sort of drifted apart.

Next thing I heard of her, she married Uncle John.

Well. I have my doubts about how faithful a wife she was to him, but certainly she seemed to make him happy. And my government assured me Uncle John was not colonized. "Too late," they said. "He is too old to be worth the risk of settling." But they respected my scruples about my uncle's wife and direct communication with Helgaland was broken off.

But there were others.

IV

FOR the next nine years—things came easy for me. I suppose the restrictions, the lack of freedom should have made me a lot more dissatisfied than I was. I know, though they didn't say so, that my people did a little manipulating of my moods by jiggering the glands and hormones or something. It must have been that with the women.

I know that after Helga I felt guilty about the whole thing. I wouldn't do it again. But then one afternoon I was painting that big amazon of a model and—Wow!

I couldn't help it. So, actually, I don't feel I should be blamed too much if, after the first couple of times, I quit trying to desert, so to speak.

And time went by, although you wouldn't have guessed it to look at me. I didn't age. My health was perfect. Well, there were a couple of very light headaches and a touch of fever, but that was only politics.

There were a couple of pretty tight elections which, of course, I followed fairly closely. After all, I had my vote, along with everyone else and I didn't want to waste it—even though, really, the political parties were pretty much the same and the elections were more questions of personality than anything else.

Then one afternoon I went to my broker's office to shift around a few investments according to plans worked out the night before. I gave my instructions. Old man Henry Schnable checked over the notes he had made.

"Now that's a funny thing," he said.

"You think I'm making a mistake?"

"Oh, no. You never have yet, so I don't suppose you are now. The funny thing is that your moves here are almost exactly the same as those another very unusual customer of mine gave me over the phone not an hour ago."

"Oh?" There was nothing very interesting about that. But, oddly enough, I was very interested.

"Yes. Miss Julia Reede. Only a child really, 21, but a brilliant girl. Possibly a genius. She comes from some little town up in the mountains. She has been in town here for just the past six months and her investments—well! Now I come to think about it, I believe they have very closely paralleled yours all along the line. Fabulously successful. You advising her?"

"Never heard of the girl."

"Well, you really should meet her, Mr. Barth. You two have so much in common, and such lovely investments. Why don't you wait around? Miss Reede is coming in to sign some papers this afternoon. You two should know each other."

HE was right. We *should* know each other. I could feel it.

"Well, Henry," I said, "perhaps I will wait. I've got nothing else to do this afternoon."

That was a lie. I had plenty of things to do, including a date with the captain of a visiting women's track team from Finland. Strangely, my people and I were in full agreement on standing up the chesty Finn, let the javelins fall where they may.

Henry was surprised too. "You are going to wait for her? Uh. Well now, Mr. Barth, your reputation—ah—that is, she's only a child, you know, from the country."

The buzzer on his desk sounded. His secretary spoke up on the intercom. "Miss Reede is here."

Miss Reede came right on in the door without waiting for a further invitation.

We stood there gaping at each other. She was small, about 5'2" maybe, with short, black, curly hair, surface-cool green eyes with fire underneath, fresh, freckled nose, slim figure. Boyish? No. Not boyish.

I stared, taking in every little detail. Every little detail was perfect and—well, I can't begin to describe it. That was for me. I could feel it all through me, she was what I had been waiting for, dreaming of.

I made a quick call on the inside switchboard, determined to fight to override the veto I was sure was coming. I called.

No answer.

For the first time, I got no regular answer. Of course, by now I always had a kind of a sense or feeling of what was going on. This time there was a feeling of a celebration, rejoicing, everybody on a holiday. Which was exactly the way I felt as I looked at the girl. No objections? Then why ask questions?

"Julia," old Henry Schnable was saying, "this is Mr. John Barth. John, this is—John! John, remember——"

I had reached out and taken the girl's hand. I tucked her arm in mine and she looked up at me with the light, the fire in the green depths swimming toward the surface. I didn't know what she saw in me—neither of us knew then—but the light was there, glowing. We walked together out of Henry Schnable's office.

"John! Julia, your papers! You have to sign——"

Business? We had business elsewhere, she and I.

"Where?" I asked her in the elevator. It was the first word either of us had spoken.

"My apartment," she said in a voice like a husky torch song. "It's close. The girl who rooms with me is spending the week back home with her folks. The show she was in closed. We can be alone."

Profile of a woman, with a standing man in the background.

We could. Five minutes in a cab and we were.

I never experienced anything remotely like it in all my life. I never will again.

AND then there was the time afterwards, and then we knew.

It was late afternoon, turning to dusk. She lifted up on one elbow and half turned away from me to switch on the bedside lamp. The light came on and I looked down at her, lovingly, admiringly. Idly, I started to ask her, "How did you get those little scars on your leg there and ... those little scars? Like buckshot! Julia! Once, along about ten years ago—you must have been a little girl then—in the mountains—sure. You were hit by a meteor, weren't you??"

She turned and stared at me. I pointed at my own little pockmark scars.

"A meteor—about ten years ago!"

"Oh!"

"I knew it. You were."

"'Some damn fool, crazy hunter,' was what Pop said. He thought it really was buckshot. So did I, at first. We all did. Of course about six months later I found out what it was but we—my little people and I—agreed there was no sense in my telling anyone. But you know."

It was the other ship. There were two in this sector, each controlled to colonize a person. My own group always hoped and believed the other ship might have landed safely. And now they knew.

We lay there, she and I, and we both checked internal communications. They were confused, not clear and precise as usual. It was a holiday in full swing. The glorious reunion! No one was working. No one was willing to put in a lot of time at the communications center talking to Julia and me. They were too busy talking to each other. I was right. The other ship.

Of course, since the other ship's landfall had been a little girl then, the early movements of the group had been restricted. Expansion was delayed. She grew up. She came to the city. Then—well, I didn't have to think about that.

We looked at each other, Julia and I. A doll she was in the first place and a doll she still was. And then on top of that was the feeling of community, of closeness coming from our people. There was a sympathy. The two of us were in the same fix. And it may be that there was a certain sense of jealousy and resentment too—like the feeling, say, between North and South America. How did we feel?

"I feel like a drink."

We said it together and laughed. Then we got up and got the drinks. I was glad to find that Julia's absent roommate, an actress, had a pretty fair bar stock.

WE had a drink. We had another. And a third.

Maybe nobody at all was manning the inner duty stations. Or maybe they were visiting back and forth, both populations in a holiday mood. They figured this was a once in a millennium celebration and, for once, the limits were off. Even alcohol was welcome. That's a line of thought that kills plenty of people every day out on the highway.

We had a couple more in a reckless toast. I kissed Julia. She kissed me. Then we had some more drinks.

Naturally it hit us hard; we weren't used to it. But still we didn't stop drinking. The limits were off for the first time. Probably it would never happen again. This was our chance of a lifetime and there was a sort of desperation in it. We kept on drinking.

"Woosh," I said, finally, "wow. Let's have one more, wha' say? One more them—an' one more those."

She giggled. "Aroun' an aroun', whoop, whoop! Dizzy. Woozy. Oughta have cup coffee."

"Naw. Not coffee. Gonna have hangover. Take pill. Apsirin."

"Can-*not*! Can-*not* take pill. Won' lemme. 'Gains talla rules."

"Can."

"Can-*not*."

"Can. No rules. Rule soff. Can. Apsirin. C'mon."

Clinging to each other, we stumbled to the bathroom. Pills? The roommate must have been a real hypochondriac. She had rows and batteries of pills. I knocked a bottle off the cabinet shelf. Aspirin? Sure, fancy aspirin. Blue, special. I took a couple.

"Apsirin. See? Easy."

Her mouth made a little, red, round "O" of wonder. She took a couple.

"Gosh! Firs' time I c'd ever take a pill."

"Good. Have 'nother?"

It was crazy, sure. The two of us were drunk. But it was more than that. We were like a couple of wild, irresponsible kids, out of control and running wild through the pill boxes. We reeled around the bathroom, sampling pills and laughing.

"Here's nice bottla red ones."

There was a nice bottle of red ones. I fumbled the top off the bottle and spilled the bright red pills bouncing across the white tile bathroom floor. We dropped to our knees after them, after the red pills, the red dots, the red, fiery moons, spinning suddenly, whirling, twirling, racing across the white floor. And then it got dark. Dark, and darker and even the red, red moons faded away.

Some eons later, light began to come back and the red moons, dim now and pallid, whirled languidly across a white ceiling.

SOMEONE said, "He's coming out of it, I think."

"Oh," I said. "Ugh!"

I didn't feel good. I'd almost forgotten what it was like, but I was sick. Awful. I didn't particularly want to look around but I did, eyes moving rustily in their sockets. There was a nurse and a doctor. They were standing by my bed in what was certainly a hospital.

"Don't ask," said the doctor. I wasn't going to. I didn't even care where I was, but he told me anyway, "You are in the South Side Hospital, Mr. Barth. You will be all right—which is a wonder, considering. Remarkable stamina! Please tell me, Mr. Barth, what kind of lunatic suicide pact was that?"

"Suicide pact?"

"Yes, Mr. Barth. Why couldn't you have settled for just one simple poison, hm-m? The lab has been swearing at you all day."

"Uh?"

"Yes. At what we pumped from your stomach. And found in the girl's. Liquor, lots of that—but then, why aspirin? Barbiturates we expect. Roach pellets are not unusual. But aureomycin? Tranquilizers? Bufferin? Vitamin B complex, vitamin C—and, finally, half a dozen highly questionable contraceptive pills? Good Lord, man!"

"It was an accident. The girl—Julia——?"

"You are lucky. She wasn't."

"Dead?"

"Yes, Mr. Barth. She is dead."

"Doctor, listen to me! It was an accident, I swear. We didn't know what we were doing. We were, well, celebrating."

"In the medicine cabinet, Mr. Barth? Queer place to be celebrating! Well, Mr. Barth, you must rest now. You have been through a lot. It was a near thing. The police will be in to see you later."

With this kindly word the doctor and his silently disapproving nurse filed out of the room.

The police? Julia, poor Julia—dead.

Now what? What should I do? I turned, as always, inward for advice and instructions. "Folks! Why didn't you stop me? Why did you let me do it? And now—what shall I do? Answer me, I say. Answer!"

There was only an emptiness. It was a hollow, aching sensation. It seemed to me I could hear my questions echoing inside me with a lonely sound.

I was alone. For the first time in nearly ten years, I was truly alone, with no one to turn to.

They were gone! At last, after all these years, they were gone. I was free again, truly free. It was glorious to be free—wasn't it?

The sheer joy of the thing brought a tightness to my throat, and I sniffled. I sniffled again. My nose was stuffy. The tightness in my throat grew tighter and became a pain.

I sneezed.

Was this joy—or a cold coming on? I shifted uneasily on the hospital bed and scratched at an itch on my left hip. Ouch! It was a pimple. My head ached. My throat hurt. I itched. Julia was dead. The police were coming. I was alone. What should I do?

"Nurse!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "Nurse, come here. I want to send a wire. Rush. Urgent. To my aunt, Mrs. Helga Barth, the address is in my wallet. Say, 'Helga. Am desperately ill, repeat, ill. Please come at once. I must have help—from you.'"

She'll come. I know she will. They've *got* to let her. It was an accident, I swear, and I'm not too old. I'm still in wonderful shape, beautifully kept up.

But I feel awful.

Well—how do you suppose New England would feel today, if suddenly all of its inhabitants died?

—WILLIAM W. STUART

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