



WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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BY KENNETH O'HARA

Barton was unique—an absolutely self-sufficient human being.

The biggest problem he had in space was holding on to his san-

ity. And he solved it by altering time itself to suit his needs . . .

THE FLOATER

AS A WATCHMAN in a man-made kind of observational meteor floating millions of miles from nowhere out among the planets, Barton had two main duties. To keep his sanity and to keep the watch. The second was simple. The gadgets all took care of themselves. All Barton did was send in a report in case an alarm went off indicating something was wrong with some gadget or other.

Staying sane was supposed to be a watcher's big problem. Barton couldn't figure out why they were so concerned, especially the neuropsychologist or whatever he was, Von Ulrich, who was always coming around in his clinical space boat, studying Barton, asking him questions, giving him all kinds of tests.



Illustrated by Paul Orban

Once something glinted like a mote in sunlight past the observation port and Von Ulrich said. "That's Collins out there. Collins was here only a week and he put on a pressure suit and jumped into space. He's still rotating round and round out there."

"Poor devil," Barton said.

"Most of them don't even last a week out here, Barton. Six months is the maximum. You've been here almost a year and you're liable to start cracking any minute. I don't like the way things look."

"I feel fine, sir."

Several months later, Von Ulrich dropped by again. "How are things going, Barton?"

"Great, sir. Just swell."

"You feel comfortable, no anxiety?"

"I feel fine."

"You've done a fine job, Barton—so far."

"Thank you, sir."

"You manage to keep occupied?"

"I just take it easy, sir."

"I see."

A few months later, Von Ulrich was back, watching Barton moulding something out of clay, a sort of human shape without a face. There were other self-amusement gimmicks, wood-working, soap-carving, movies and the like, but Barton preferred moulding things haphazardly out of clay, and sometimes reading one of the books he wasn't supposed to have brought along because books were no longer popular.

"What were you thinking about when you moulded this thing?" Von Ulrich asked.

"Nothing much, sir."

"You must have been thinking of something?"

"I guess I was thinking of a man sleeping beside a river in green grass with nobody for miles around. Something like that."

"You weren't by any chance thinking about a dead man?"

"I don't like death much."

Later on sometime, Von Ulrich dropped around again on his therapeutic tour of basketballs, and Martian bases, and other bases even

more remote. Barton wondered how anyone could find the basketball drifting in all that blackness. Just a little ragged spheroid like a piece of dead slag, something like a cork bobbing in a black ocean too big even to bother thinking about. If no one ever found the basketball Barton would have been happier, because the basketball was self-sustaining and could go on and on for years without supplies or any human contact.

"Getting a little lonely maybe?" Von Ulrich asked.

"No sir."

"Don't miss having people around. Your wife, your son?"

Barton wanted to laugh.

"Well, I'll be back to see you, Barton. I may be gone a year this time."

"Happy New Year," Barton said.

But it didn't seem like a year when Von Ulrich came back in his sleek little space-hopping clinic. It didn't seem like much of anything.

"You don't find the absence of women irritating, Barton?"

"I can take them or leave them, sir."

"Not here. There simply aren't any at all."

"I like something, but then if it isn't there, I don't miss it."

"All right, Barton," Von Ulrich would say after giving Barton more brain-wave tests, word-association tests and making him look at ink-blots until his eyes turned red. "See you in a few months."

"See you, sir," Barton said.

And sure enough, as though he had never really been away, Von Ulrich would show up again, with

his testing devices, his cages of mice and guinea pigs, and his intense searching eyes. He had a folder of pictures and after ink-blot tests, he had Barton look at the pictures, like the one of a man in deep shadow standing over a sleeping kid.

"What do you see there, Barton?"

"A guy standing over a kid."

"What's he doing there?"

"I haven't any idea."

"Is the child sleeping?"

"Maybe it's just pretending."

"Pretending what?"

"Or maybe it's dead."

Von Ulrich's thin face frowned intensely. "Is the child pretending to be asleep, or is it dead?"

"Maybe it isn't a real kid. Maybe it's a dummy."

Von Ulrich's face reddened. "What's the man thinking?"

"How should I know, sir."

"You don't care?"

"No, why should I give a damn what he's thinking?"

"You tell me. Why shouldn't you?"

"Because it's none of my business."

Then there was another time, during some visit or other, when Von Ulrich pulled another word association test.

"Love."

"It makes the world go round."

"Blackness."

"Sleep."

"Alone."

"Quiet."

It went on for hours. Von Ulrich always seemed to be angrier because Barton didn't crack up, or

because he insisted on turning in a perfect service record in the basketball.

"Barton, for God's sake, don't you realize how important this watch is? This valuable information gathered by these recorders. Think what it would mean if that data fell into the hands of the Asians! What if you missed an alarm, or fouled up in some way, and one of these recorders destroyed all the data?"

"Haven't I been alert all the time, sir?"

"Yes! But you've been out here now for three years! Three years. No one can possibly stand it longer than six months. And the fact that you've been here for three years only means some absolutely catastrophic crack-up is being prolonged, built up inside."

"I don't feel a bit different, sir."

"There are subtle ways of cracking up."

"You *want* me to have some sort of symptom or something?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

IT MUST have been at least another year before Von Ulrich came back to Barton's basketball, triumphantly equipped with new devices, and waving a spacegram in Barton's sleepy face. Barton read it, shrugged, and let it drift to the floor. Von Ulrich tried to control a look almost of fear.

"As soon as the minimum time allowed, she married again," Von Ulrich said. "And you pretend it means nothing?"

"She never did mean much of anything, sir. I mean, she was an

interfering kind of woman. She wouldn't let a man live."

"All right, Barton. What about this? She was committing adulterous acts with this fellow, this Major General Woods. She was having an affair with him for two years before you volunteered for duty in the basketball."

"I figured she was playing around."

"You what?"

"It figured."

"You still pretend it meant nothing, that it means nothing now?"

"I don't know what it means. What's it got to do with me now? It was all right, I guess. I could have gone on with it. But this is better."

He dimly remembered Jean bitching all the time of an evening because Barton kept forgetting to take his officer's exam, and how she had to skimp along on an NCO's lousy salary, and so on and so forth. Very much the nagging kind. She wouldn't let him read either. He would tell her he was just sort of stupid, and had always been a drifter anyway, and just sort of fell into marriage and that he never had had any ambition particularly, and anyway big brass got ulcers and heart conditions. And then she would drag little Joey, the big-headed little brat into it, and talk about how little Joey didn't have the right kind of idealized image to assure him a respectable future, and little Joey would stand there and nod his oversized head.

"What about little Joey's future?" Jean would say. "You want him to be just another stupid

NCO? And what about his teeth? He's got to have his teeth straightened. They tease him at school, call him The Squirrel."

"Yeah, Dad. You want me to be personable and saleable and high on the success potential scale? What about my teeth protruding?"

And when Barton went into the bathroom and came back out, Jean was throwing all those books he'd had such a hard time finding into the incinerator. Barton volunteered the next day for basketball duty.

It didn't even seem long ago to Barton. It was oddly like a dream that might have been in the past, or the future, or never at all.

Von Ulrich grabbed up the spacegram and walked stiffly erect out of the basketball.

At some time in the future, Von Ulrich showed up again with even more complicated tests and questions. Barton wasn't sure, but it seemed longer than usual that Von Ulrich was away these days. Time didn't mean much. It didn't have any particular use to Barton now.

"Yes, yes, you have a perfect service record, Barton. Never have missed turning in an alarm with alacrity. And we're so damned short of men capable of taking this kind of duty that I can't pull you out of here until you make an error—or crack up. Just the same you're not fooling me much longer, and you won't be able to fool yourself either."

Sometime later there was the business about Barton's mother. Von Ulrich had files on Barton going clear back to pre-natal, and maybe even before that.

"All right, Barton, you were an only child, and you lived with your mother for 10 years after your father died. Then you married. What about the fact that Jean was a replacement for your mother?"

"If she was, it never seemed that way to me."

"You expected your wife to take care of you the way your mother did. And not demand anything of you. You expected to escape all responsibility and—Barton, do you consider this basketball to be your mother?"

"What's that, sir?"

"Deafness can be psychosomatic too, don't forget that. I said—but you heard me, answer me."

"Doctor Von Ulrich, maybe I'm not normal, but—"

"Then you admit the regression. That this basketball floating in space is a substitute for your mother's womb. You admit it!"

"Why, sir, I didn't—"

"But you know it's true don't you?"

"I didn't say anything about it. You said it."

"I said it because it's a summation of years of careful diagnosis. Look at the etiology. A man who never matured, never was able to accept responsibility as a mature adult. Always just drifting along, into one job, out of it, into another job, out of that, never establishing roots anywhere, always floating about. Unable to accept any responsibility for your marriage, wanting to escape it. Never able to get close, get involved with others, only wanting to receive, never give. What does it add up to? A fix, a

freeze in the pre-natal stage where you were floating free and completely irresponsible in your mother's amniotic fluid. That's why you're here in the basketball."

Von Ulrich's intense eyes seemed to reach out like arms to enfold Barton, then recoiled as Barton shrugged and said: "So, it's like my Ma's womb. What difference does it make what you call it as long as I'm happy in it and do my job?"

Von Ulrich's lips moved soundlessly and then he pointed a finger into Barton's nose. "It makes a helluva lot of difference what you call it. You may be doing an efficient job here, but for the wrong reasons. I wish I could recommend, on the basis of my diagnosis, that you agree to a month's checkup in the Martian Clinic but—"

Barton interrupted. "I'm glad you can't. I wouldn't like that as much as this. Maybe your reports won't cut much ice as long as I keep up the perfect service record."

Von Ulrich's jaws were ridged. "Damn the military system! Damn a system that says a man has to stay up here till he's dead or crazy or makes a mistake!"

"But Doc, I like it. I'm happier here, I think. Maybe I wasn't normal on Earth. Maybe I'm not normal here, or maybe being abnormal on Earth makes me normal here. I'm happy and I do my work."

Von Ulrich backed away a few steps, then turned and ran out and slammed the sliding panel. He didn't say goodbye to Barton this time, or that he would be back. But Barton took no hope from Von Ulrich's lack of ceremony.

Von Ulrich did come back, several times. Barton was sleeping a great deal now. He didn't putter with the gimmicks much, not even the clay, and he'd about read the books out. He slept a lot and yet there was a funny heavy feeling as though he never did quite sleep or never quite woke up either. But it was a good feeling because when a man was too sound asleep he didn't enjoy it because he didn't know anything about it. This was sort of in-between, and Barton loved it. Sometimes he would blink his eyes and see Von Ulrich standing there, probably with some new testing device, or with a notebook open, or with a helmet with wires to attach to Barton's skull to record something.

Another time he thought some stranger was there and then he realized that Von Ulrich's face was sagging and wrinkled and that his hair was thinner and gray.

"Why not have groups of watchers if you're so worried about one being alone?"

"We tried that, it was worse, Barton. They killed one another."

"Well, sir, my being alone is a good thing then, in that respect."

"Have you ever thought that you would kill yourself?"

"Why no, sir. Why should I?"

"Because you hate yourself. In a society, people can externalize their self-hate. They can hate society, other people. You can only turn your hate inward, on yourself."

"But I don't hate anything, sir."

"You do!"

"But, sir, I don't."

"Barton, I said you hate yourself.

It's in all the charts, everything. We all hate ourselves to some extent, why should you be different from everybody else?"

"Why not, sir?"

Von Ulrich pressed his hand over his eyes, and walked out.

IT WAS like a dream with a shadow drifting in and out and in again, and it was Von Ulrich, looking so much older this time. "It's been almost fifteen years, Barton. Fifteen years."

"So? Fifteen years earth time. What does that mean here to me, sir?" Barton smiled, closed his eyes. "What does time matter in your mother's womb?"

"You've developed a definite measurable syndrome, Barton. Excessive lethargy and a sleeping compulsion. Eventually it will destroy your efficiency as a watcher if it hasn't already."

Von Ulrich set off an alarm and in less than four seconds Barton was over there sending a report out to the authorities, a report Von Ulrich immediately canceled as being false.

Von Ulrich seemed to dissolve in a haze of fading light.

"Is that you, Von Ulrich, sir?"

"I'm afraid so, Barton. Back again."

Von Ulrich sat down in the contour chair and filled a pipe.

"Remember, Barton when you took your test for basketball duty? The dead man's float?"

"I sort of remember it, sir. It was fun."

Von Ulrich flinched. "Fun? I've

gone over that report on your test, Barton. It doesn't make sense. What the hell are you anyway? A damned freak, a mutation, an alien in disguise?"

The dead man's float had been pleasant for Barton, that was all he could remember about it. They had taken off all Barton's clothes so that nothing touched Barton's body but a blacked-out head-mask through which to get air. He had been put in a tank of water at body temperature upside down and floated there. There was no sensation. It had been one of the happiest times of his life. Like floating on air. Hearing nothing, seeing nothing, feeling nothing except his own existence. Not even able to tell which was right side up, or right side down, cross-wise or whatnot. He had been told to keep still, but nobody had needed to tell him to do that.

"The first two or three hours of that dead man's float is a good test for basketball duty, Barton. It's a kind of final isolation of the human organism. Normal human beings can take a couple of hours of it usually. They like it. Every human being to some extent likes to return to the womb. But after a couple of hours most human beings start going to pieces, short-circuiting. The reason is the deprivation of any outside stimuli. Something has to feed in through some source—some reception source—the skin, ears, nose, the eyes. These things feeding in, they orient a person, tells him when he's thinking, feeling, gives him stimuli for additional thinking. With all these turned off, a person is simply left with a closed circuit.

This begins to go round and round and distorts and magnifies and ruptures the whole thinking process. The floater becomes anxious, then very anxious, then he begins having hallucinations, finally becomes completely disoriented. All this happens to a normal human being inside, at the most, three or four hours. No human being should be able to remain sane after four hours of the dead man's float, Barton. But remember how long you lay there in that tank?"

"I didn't care how long it was."

"Three days," Von Ulrich said. "The neurophysiologist in charge there kept checking your reaction and finally he had to take you out of the tank, not because you were short-circuiting, but because he was. The impression was that you would have been delighted with the prospect of doing the dead man's float forever."

"I don't remember it being any special time. It was like a dream, sir, you know."

"I don't know, but I'm trying to find out." Von Ulrich sighed and looked through the spaceport at blackness. "Out here I sometimes find myself wondering what normalcy really is. Things sometimes veer toward the dangerously relativistic." He sat there in the pure one hundred percent silence of the basketball while it accumulated. "There's one thing we've always insisted no human being could tolerate, Barton. Isolation. Sullivan said that a single minute of complete isolation would kill a human being. And you've been in a dead man's float for almost twenty-two years."

"Twenty-two years, sir?"

"Doesn't mean a thing to you does it?"

"Well, sir, it doesn't seem to have had any time in it. I was just here."

There was another time, like all the other times, except that Von Ulrich seemed much older, his hair thinner and now all of it gray. There seemed to be something tired about him, except for the brightness coming from behind his intense questioning eyes.

Suddenly he asked, "Barton, what time is it?"

Barton glanced at the chrono. "Quarter of four, sir."

"Keep looking."

After a while Barton said, "Still quarter of four."

"That chrono hasn't been working for three years. I stopped it three years ago. You haven't even noticed it, have you?"

"I guess not, sir."

"Take a long look out there, Barton. Nothing to see but blackness. No feeling of distance. Imagine your mind going out there, exploring, trying to fit in somewhere. You look out there, you project your thoughts out there, nothing comes back. So what time is it? Where are you in all this? There was nothing out here until you came along, not even any meaningful kind of time out here. *But there has to be some feeling of time, Barton!*"

Barton felt a tinge of uneasiness. He looked out. It looked cold.

"What time is it, Barton?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Your body has to know. Your

body works on a timetable doesn't it? Your lungs, expanding, contracting regularly. Your heart beating so many times regularly—*every minute*. Your blood circulating regularly. Look here, Barton. You're a product of a specific environment, on a big scale, call it Earth, the Solar System. You claim it means nothing, time means nothing. But your heart beats regularly so many times every minute and that's why you're alive. Where did the arbitrary rhythm of that beat come from, Barton? You were born with it. It isn't anything you control, or had anything to do with developing, is it? What's a minute? On Earth, it has meaning. Sixty seconds part of a minute. Sixty minutes make up an hour. What's an hour but a segment of a 24 hour day. Where does that figure come from? The Earth, Barton. It rotates on its axis approximately every 24 hours. 24 hours make a day, seven days a week, so many weeks in a month, twelve months make up a year. A year, Barton, the Earth rotates around the sun once a year."

For the first time in the basketball, Barton began to feel some discomfort. He closed his eyes and while they were closed he became acutely aware of his heart beating, and the expanding and contracting of his lungs.

"You claim there is no Earth any more, Barton. No Earth rotating on its axis, no Earth rotating around the sun. No sun, no moon, no time. Why should your heart go on beating regularly so many times a minute—when there's nothing out here that gives a minute

any meaning? Has time stopped here? Is there any time here, Barton, when there's nothing here to turn time into measurable segments? How can your heart beat so many times a minute, a year, a lifetime if there's no such thing here any more?"

Barton slowly opened his eyes. His hands felt wet.

"This basketball doesn't rotate, Barton. Doesn't move toward, away from, or around anything. It's moving with the Galaxy but that can't mean anything to you can it? Listen, Barton, your body operates largely on an unconscious level, but what if unconsciously your heart, your lungs, your bodily functions start to lose their conditioned memory of the Earth's rotation, the regularity of its movement on its axis and around the Sun that gave your birth? What will happen then, Barton? What happens to your heart-beat if your heart begins to forget how long a minute is?"

Von Ulrich leaned down close to Barton's damp face.

"What time is it, Barton?"

Barton started to look out the spaceport again, but jerked his head in the other direction. He didn't want to look out. Von Ulrich waited, but Barton didn't say anything. Finally, with a tight smile on his face, Von Ulrich got up and went to the door.

"I'll see you again, Barton. Some time."

Barton started. "Wait—don't go," he started to say. But something constricted in his throat and he hardly even moved his lips, and no sound came out at all.

He saw the cold streak flash past the view port. It was Von Ulrich's clinic. Quickly he looked toward the wall. The chrono was gone. Von Ulrich had taken it with him. There was a watch, a wrist watch. Barton ran around looking for the wrist watch, but he couldn't find it.

When he lay down again and closed his eyes, he couldn't rest. He couldn't sleep. His heart beat got louder, and after a while that was all he could hear, and when he tried to figure out how many times a minute his heart was, or was not, beating, he couldn't.

What time was it?

THE WAR in which all of Earth's outposts were involved, lasted thirty years. The basketballs were forgotten for a long time, and when they were remembered again, a special search was rewarded by finding only two of them. In the first basketball there was no trace of the watchman who had been abandoned in it almost half a century before, and no indication of what had happened to him.

In the second one, Von Ulrich found Barton still lying peacefully on the couch, looking hardly any different than when Von Ulrich had walked out and left him there.

Von Ulrich, who had been retired for a long time and who was unable to get about except in a wheel-chair, had requested inclusion among the search boat's personnel. No one had figured out why because even if they found any basketballs, it was certain that no one would be alive on any of them,

let alone anyone needing Von Ulrich's specialized talents.

Von Ulrich had hoped that Barton's basketball would be found and when it was found, he insisted on being carried through the inter-connecting airlock into the spheroid that looked on the outside like a dead piece of slag.

The ship's medical officer, a man young and rather stiff, was shocked at first to see Barton lying there, but he had a ready explanation as he used his stethoscope. "Must have sprung a leak and let in preserving frigidity."

"But then how did the leak repair itself and the temperature return to normal?" Von Ulrich asked as he studied Barton's smooth, un-aged face.

"Dead," the medical officer said, and he dropped the stethoscope back into his case.

Von Ulrich gripped the husks of his hands together to keep them from rattling, and he smiled slowly. "Barton didn't like death much."

Zeiger the medical officer looked puzzled. "You know this man?"

"A little. I tried to know him better but a war intervened. His name is Harry Barton and he was assigned to duty in this basketball fifty-three years and about four months ago."

Zeiger turned away as though to hide an embarrassed reaction.

"You think I speak out of some mental senility, Zeiger? You know this man isn't dead."

"He has to be dead."

"Not Barton. He would hardly approve of your diagnosis. He never cared much for diagnosis

anyway. This is Harry Barton, and I've preserved—for personal reasons—his file. I have it with me. You want to check his fingerprints? You'll find it's the same man who was assigned to duty here fifty-three years ago."

"There's no heart-beat," Zeiger insisted, but not very enthusiastically.

"Better give Barton a more thorough check," Von Ulrich said.

Barton's heart was beating all right. Once every thirty-seven hours and fourteen seconds. Regularly, strongly, very slowly, but without a tremor. The electroencephalograph registered brain waves of regular rhythm, but of quite low amplitude. But with a frequency slowed to a point so far below normalcy that it took a week to establish recognizable delta, theta, alpha and higher frequency wave-forms. Using the electronic stroboscope to induce changes in brain-wave reaction by flicker got results. But the frequency didn't change. When they forced Barton's eyes open and used the stroboscope, a slight change in theta rhythm signified some irritation, but it was mild.

"Barton never hated anybody," Von Ulrich said.

It was slow work though, testing Barton's reactions. It was five days after the stroboscopic stimulation before the termination of the brain reactive crescendo. Another week before theta rhythm returned to normal.

". . . so I finally decided," Von Ulrich told Zeiger, "that Barton was unique—he was the impossible.

The absolutely self-sufficient human being, needing nothing but himself. I was getting older and I figured there was a chance I might not get back and the war threat and so forth. I was worried about leaving Barton. But only for one reason."

Von Ulrich explained his concern about what might have happened if Barton's autonomic nervous system had lost its identification with the time factor that had conditioned it.

"I figured Barton was absolutely self-sufficient, except for the time factor. He had to have something outside himself relatively to which his organs could function in a necessary regularity."

Zeiger poured himself another shot of rum and drank it quickly.

"So he's still here," Zeiger said. "We'll have to take him to the Martian Base for observation."

"Why not leave him here? Barton has a perfect service record. He's never missed an alarm."

"But in this condition—"

"Let's see." Von Ulrich set off an alarm. Barton moved, but it took him almost a week to move a few inches.

"That's too slow," Zeiger insisted.

Von Ulrich said, "I'll turn in a complete report on Barton. If the authorities want to have him removed, all right. But maybe they won't. Maybe they'll decide they have a laboratory here for the study

of a human being that's more important than whatever's being absorbed by those recorders. Barton is the thing to watch. I call him the 'Adaptable,' because I believe he can adapt to anything, fit himself into any situation, any kind of environmental circumstance, if he's not interfered with too much, if he's given even a slight chance. You see he altered his metabolism in order to relate to a different, highly personalized time. And he hasn't aged much either. God knows how long he will live, Zeiger, with such a slowed metabolism. And not only that—who knows what unique kind of personalized time he's developing there inside himself? Who knows if we can even make a human comparison?"

"But how did he set this new arbitrary time of his? The heart beating every thirty-seven hours and fourteen seconds?"

Von Ulrich looked through the spaceport, and then pointed when the pressure suit drifted past with the long-dead Collins perfectly preserved in it and still looking out through the face plate.

"That way," Von Ulrich said. "Collins is our little human satellite out there, and he rotates around the basketball once every thirty-seven hours and fourteen seconds."

"Well I'll be damned," Zeiger said.

"Of our time, that is," Von Ulrich said. "But our time doesn't mean anything to Barton now."

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