

# STARTLING *stories*

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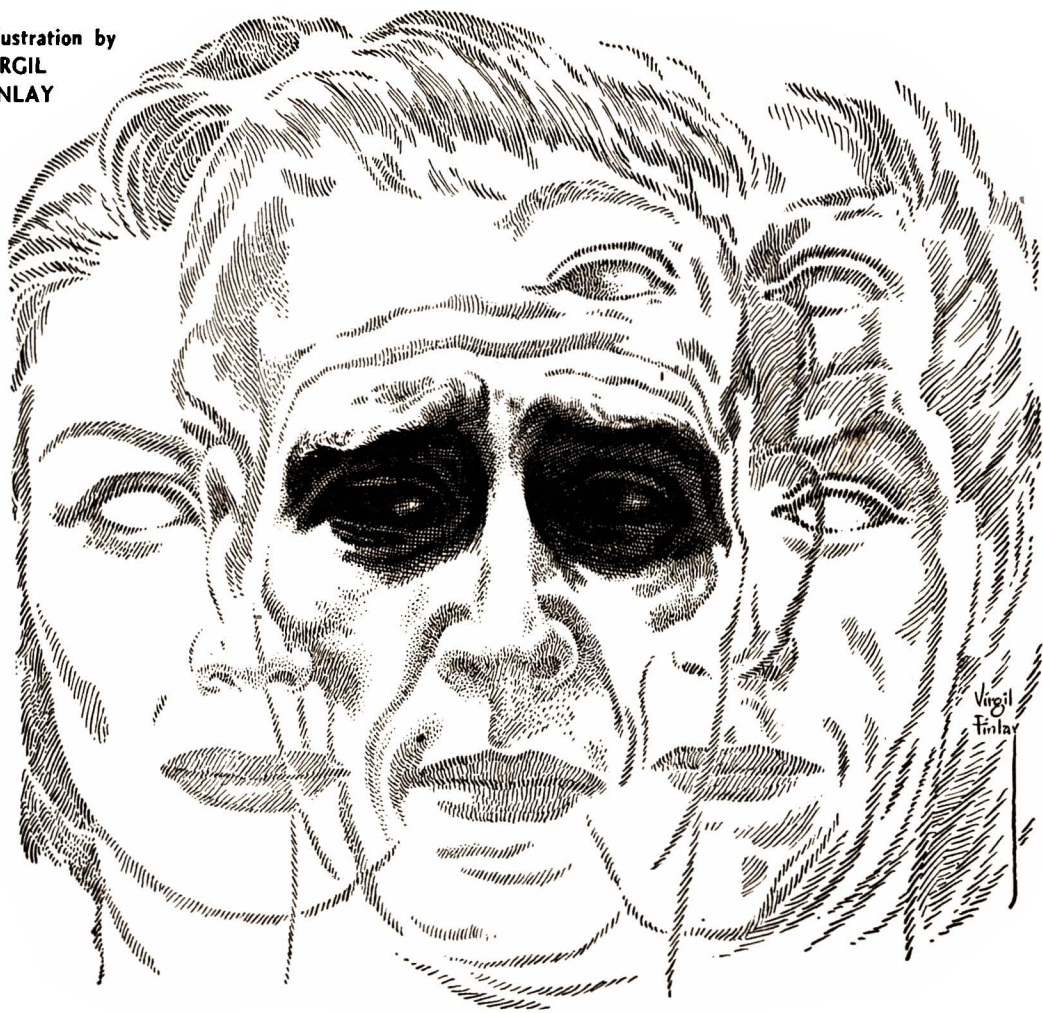
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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He felt himself submerging into the anonymous consciousness of everybody

# THE GLOB

By BRYCE WALTON

*Can a man join the force that has destroyed all he loves?*

**H**E WASN'T in. He wasn't out. But a man ought to be one or the other. He had to be one thing or the other, in or out, or he wouldn't be anything at all. He was a little more afraid of nothing maybe, than he was of being in.

"Stop thinking things like that, Barry. Now stop it!"

"That's the way I feel," Barry's consciousness shouted, if a voiceless consciousness could shout at another voiceless consciousness.

"We know you can't live neither in nor out, Barry. We know you can't live alone, and you can't live the way you're, neither in nor out. So just relax, give way, let yourself go, boy, and come on in with us!"

"But then I wouldn't be *me* any more!"

If somewhere he really still had a head, Barry thought, it would be aching. But of course he still had a head otherwise he couldn't be thinking, feeling, hearing.

"You'd better come in with us, Barry! Please now—just let yourself go. Stop fighting it. It's just something that *has to be!*"

It was just *it*, Barry thought. Not even anything human now. *It* called itself *we*, but when all the consciousness of the starship's crew had somehow fused into one mass consciousness there weren't any individuals left any more. So *it* had no right to call *itself* *we*.

Sometimes, Barry thought he could catch a feel of some particle of an individual in that big glob of mass consciousness: Maria, Gabriel, Donaldson, Anna, Earl, Dehl, Roland, Jean, Jerry, Rita, Theron, Harry, Scott, Ruth, Phil, Ira, Leanore, Marion, Daniel, Winnie. But only sometimes, and those times were becoming less distinct and less frequent all the time.

They were lost. Lost, the poor lonely devils. Lost and buried in one another. Didn't even have bodies any more. But surely they did have bodies, for how could just pure consciousness live and think without a body, or bodies, somewhere.

That business about the bodies was what really worried Barry. Barry had always liked his body, and he wondered what had happened to it. It was a big healthy body—or had been—about six feet, with red hair, and a zest for life. He had always liked his body more than his brain, a preference agreeable to his closer acquaintances—

"I want my body!" his thought howled. "I want it back. I want to *live!*"

"But Barry, please! Please be reasonable. Don't be stubborn like this. You're just causing a lot of unnecessary trouble!"

The fused consciousness of the crew of the Ion Starship moved in from all around with sudden determination. It wasn't anything you could actually see. You sensed it, somehow, all around and inside, but

you couldn't really see it. He resisted, he fought. But then he felt himself damn near submerging again in the anonymous consciousness of everybody—sinking, going under, being absorbed, lost, faceless and sick of this god-awful threat of losing himself and becoming he-had-forgotten-how-many-other-people who were no longer people at all—but *it!*

"I won't come in. I won't, dammit!"

**S**UDDENLY, then, he was no longer aware of the mass consciousness at all. That stifling invisible mass of feelings, thoughts, memories—sweating, twisting and squirming. Something snapped somewhere, and he seemed blessedly alone.

And then there was Billings. Just he and Billings, alone together. Alone but invisible to one another. Two separate consciousnesses, or bits of life force, or whatever the hell anyone wanted to label whatever you were when you were conscious, able to communicate with others, but had no body, nor eyes, but only a huge raw sense of touch.

Billings was the psychologist of the Star Ship. Billings knew everything about human beings except how to be one himself. He was cold and efficient. As far as Barry was concerned, a calculating machine could do the job as well.

"How come you're out of the mass soup, Billings?"

"I want to try to reason with you," Billings thought, and his thought was as precise and geometrical as an ice crystal.

"I didn't think you or any of the others had any individuality any more," Barry said.

"I've kept enough of it to come out and have one more talk with you."

"Why?"

"Because we love you, Barry."

"Oh God, don't go on like that, I'll bust into tears," Barry said.

"We want to save you," Billings said.

"How come you had the guts to come out, Billings? I didn't think even you had the guts to come out from your glob of sweet sharing."

"This isn't out. You're not out either, Barry. If you were, you'd be insane by now. You're neither in nor out, and we want you the rest of the way in."

"Go to hell," Barry thought. "And if you can't make it alone, take the glob with you!"

"I'm going back in for good this time when I go," Billings thought. "And you're coming in with me."

"Like you'll see Earth again I will," Barry tried to shout without a body.

Billings went to work on him with his own unique kind of patient vengeance. . . .

They, or *It*, had to have him all the way in. He was a threat to them the way he was, dangling somewhere, somehow, between his body and the glob of final sharing. Everyone in the Starship had run together like whining dogs to escape loneliness and darkness and the endless thing that time was when you tried to stretch it out between Earth and the binary star, Alpha Centauri.

Barry had thought a lot about it and he knew how it was, or had been. 4.3 light years was too far, and Barry knew it now. Even at 6,000 miles a second it was too long. No matter how fast light travels, fifty-three years of that kind of time is too long.

Interstellar flight was too big. It had seemed a deeply satisfying thing for the martyrs. Knowing they would die before they ever got to Alpha Centauri, knowing they would never see the stellar system they were to colonize, or rather that their descendants would colonize.

That was it!

How could they have descendants if they still didn't have bodies?

"I've still got by body!" Barry shouted, or hoped he shouted, but how could you tell when you couldn't even know if you had a mouth or not, or—

Concentrate on that—his body—knowing he had a body. The hell with Billings, and whatever *it* was.

His body! Remember it, carefully, recall the feel of it, the way it moved around, the contours of it, the face, maybe just concentrate on one little special feature of the body, the unique brown color of the eyes—"You can't get all the way out of us," Billings' thought cut in, "unless we let you."

"You'd better let me then," Barry thought.

"We won't do that, Barry."

"Stop calling yourself we! You're just a glob! Listen, if I'm such a headache why don't you just let me go?"

"Because we love you, Barry."

Barry tried to laugh.

"You can't laugh alone, Barry. Not out here. You come in and then it's all one big laugh, together. . . ."

**F**EELINGS, longings, memories, love flickered around Barry. He could feel Anna's and Gabriel's love, that longing to merge completely with him, carry him away into the deep fused consciousness of them all.

Gabriel's love. His wife's love. But that was only a memory, of course. There wasn't a Gabriel now. She was part of the invisible glob. There could never be any aloneness with Gabriel any more, never that secret sharing of parts of themselves in a private darkness all their own—

"The past is all dead now, Barry. Gabriel's part of us now. We're all one. To share Gabriel you've got to come all the way in, and forget what it was like before."

"And share all the rest of you at the same time? Don't be ridiculous! Whatever the glob is, there isn't anything human about it now!"

"We're human, Barry. Only we're a different kind of humanity. Think—think hard. Have you forgotten what it was like on this starship—*alone?*"

There was something cold about the thought.

"It never bothered me! I've always liked my own company. Even when I was a kid, I was considered anti-social."

"But that was on Earth, Barry."

"You don't want to save me," Barry tried to make his thought scream. "You want to kill me, bury me in the glob!"

"You know that isn't true, Barry. We have to survive, and we learned we couldn't do that as separate individuals out here. This isn't Earth. This is too lonely. Loneliness can kill a human being out here, and it can kill him fast. *Fast*, Barry!"

"Speak for yourself, or whatever you are now, not me!"

"Barry—"

"Bunch of yellow bastards, all of you! Huddling together wasn't enough. No, you had to get inside one another, merge!"

He could feel the glob all around like a kind of thick suffocating mist, ready to rush in to absorb him. All around, the nervous threatening tenseness waiting.

Billings wasn't going to give up. Billings' job was to get everybody, in whatever form possible, to Alpha Centauri. He was going to do it even if nothing human got there. Just so something got there.

"Now you listen, just once more, Barry."

"How can I help it?"

"You can't survive outside of us, Barry. Then you would be *alone*. Then you would have to get some identity in relationship to the Starship, and you can't. The problem is one of vast distances and interminable transits, and you can't live alone in it. You can't live alone with yourself knowing you'll never see Earth again, nor Alpha Centauri either, that you'll never see anything familiar again. You gave yourself over to something bigger than *you* when you signed on this trip. You gave yourself to humanity. So humanity's ultimate chance of survival would be a little better because of having colonies in other stellar systems. So now, Barry, you've got to go on and become part of us, part of something bigger—"

"I was wrong. I shouldn't have signed on," Barry thought. "I don't believe there can or should be anything bigger than an individual."

"You're wrong, Barry. This is an evolutionary step, something above and bigger than the individual. Realizing our basic oneness, similarizing. The Starship's a closed system, a test tube, Barry. Evolution stepped up because of necessity—"

"Don't go on," Barry thought. "And I'll tell you why. You're just a helluva bore, Billings. You and the glob."

It was coming at him, closing in. He had never before felt it as angry!

He was kicking and screaming, batting out, panicked, and the pulsing mass moved in from all around.

And then, all at once, he knew, *he knew!* He was *out!*

**T**HE YELL was his. It wasn't part of anything else. It was just his. His very own hoarse and rusty yell.

Barry's own wonderful private yell

breaking free and escaping and echoing like a joyful burst of music and bouncing everywhere.

He luxuriated in private feelings, almost new because they had not been his for so long. Sure, he had a body. He had always had a body. He could feel himself alive and pulsing—his heart, his lungs—his eyes blinking, his mouth moving and getting wet.

Then the alarm went off; the waking alarm. His shift in the library was coming up. What the devil? It was as though nothing had changed at all!

He ran out of his compartment into the passageway. He was cleanly shaven. His body was clean. Everything was clean and well kept. There were other bodies. Everything moved, functioned just the way it always had.

He had some idea that maybe the bodies were all dead, or in suspended animation of some kind. But that was ridiculous. Good God, had he been having some kind of dream; a nightmare?

He saw Anna's husband, Rafael, walking along, studying a manual on astrophysics. Rafael nodded absently the way he always did. There were Winnie and Lionel walking toward the messhall for lunch. He saw Marion running somewhere. She had always been running somewhere, always in a good but frantic cause, and nothing had changed there either.

There was Earl heading for his shift in the machine shop. And he saw almost all the others too, and nothing seemed any different.

A dream? A nightmare? The glob—He had never impressed himself as being the kind of case that would cook up something like that.

He ran into the library. One look at the desk convinced him that he had been working his regular shift for all the details had his personality. The things were arranged the way he arranged them. And there was Gabriel. She was labeling spools and putting them away in racks.

"Gabby," he yelled.

She turned. "Hi, Barry."

"Honey," he whispered. "Darling Gabby—"

She turned back to the spools as though she had been seeing him the same as al-

ways. So maybe—why of course—nothing had changed! He wanted to shout with joy, and then go see Billings the psychologist and get that crazy nightmare figured out.

"Barry darling, I felt kind of funny this morning. Sort of nauseous. I went to see the doc, and he said my pregnancy—"

Barry ran out of the library and from compartment to compartment. The machine shops, the mess halls, the educational wards, the park, the recreation center. He talked to a lot of people, and nothing seemed to be any different.

And then, up close, he got a good look at Maury's eyes.

It made him feel a little sick and then frightened. Maury's eyes were not exactly empty. Just dull, like a flashlight with the beam turning yellow. A bit glazed. Something vital was missing from Maury's eyes, that was all. Something you were distinctly aware of when it was there, and even more aware of when it wasn't. A spark was missing.

And Barry knew then, as he had known once before, where the spark was.

In the glob.

But he didn't want to believe it, so he started yelling at them.

They just shrugged or did nothing at all but go on about their necessary business.

So maybe I just went nuts during the night, he thought. So now I don't know whether there is a glob or not.

**H**E FOUND Billings in the medical ward talking to a surgeon named Yulsman.

"Billings," Barry whispered. "Was it some kind of crazy nightmare? I mean this idea of mine about all of us getting out of our material bodies and combining our minds, or life force, or whatever it is. I mean—do you think maybe I'm crazy or something?"

"What's that again now?" Billings asked.

Barry tried to explain. It was an easier thing to feel than to define.

"So, you're upset and had a dream, so what?" Billings said. "That's a mild symptom for deep space sickness. I'll give you a sedative."

But now Barry could see Billings' eyes. And Doctor Yulsman's eyes. There was

no spark in them. They were damn near dead eyes, he thought.

"All right, I'll check in with you later," Barry whispered.

Billings turned and resumed his conversation with Yulsman. "It's astonishing, Jerald," he heard Billings say. "But Barry there's the first case of maladjustment I've had in a long time. Everybody else seems to be thoroughly adjusted now. He'll take some working on."

"He's an odd one anyway. Maybe not such a good choice."

"He'll be all right."

But Barry, as he ran, kept thinking about their dull and disinterested eyes.

He stopped in the messhall and sat down and stared at the black unmirroring spaceport with nothing rushing forever past.

Why not? he thought. Everyone and everything so highly specialized. A robot could do most of it anyway. It would be easy for the bodies to go on doing the highly specialized robotic work, while the other consciousness fused somewhere in the invisible glob. All automata, doing with great skill what they had been conditioned to do, and what they had been doing so long they could do it without any real deep conscious awareness of themselves, or of the ship. And most important, without even being aware of where they were, or where they were not, or why.

Just fleshly robots, and the *real* they were fused into some godawful kind of new mass consciousness.

That was the only explanation for it. The only other one he could think of was that he was nuts . . .

He ran into the library again. Gabriel was repairing some broken tape on some spools, sitting at a small work table over in the corner by the G-to-L spool racks.

"Gabby!" He pulled her to her feet and held her tightly, a strained attempt to squeeze something recognizably warm and human out of her dull, disinterested and wholly detached eyes.

He tried to explain to her about the glob. He talked intensely for a long time to Gabriel. But then he realized that she wasn't listening.

Then he was shouting and shaking her. "Surely, Gabby, *you* know what's happened! You can't really live in the glob,

can you? Come back to me, Gabby! Oh God, please come back—someone has to come back to me, and it ought to be you—you can come back—think about it—”

She just didn't seem to hear him.

“Honey,” she said. “I'm going to have twins. Doc just told me. He said I was going to have twins. My complete duty to Alpha Centauri all in one happy package! I'm so glad—”

“That's great,” Barry whispered. He backed toward the door, and then he ran out and down the tubular hallway toward the messhall.

The real feelings, the real aliveness, had all grown together somewhere else. The glob. A whole new kind of life developing. These bodies just didn't count any more.

And then he knew. He remembered. He knew what Billings had been talking about, and trying to get Barry to remember. *Loneliness.*

**H**E HAD never really felt it before though; not the way he felt it now, because now he really was alone. He felt it all at once, all over and inside of him, and it was icy cold.

No loneliness that anyone could feel on Earth was anything like it. It was an ultimate and alien loneliness bred out of timeless darkness and the knowledge that you were suspended in the middle of nowhere.

And then he saw the kids' eyes, and the little babies' eyes, and they were all dull and unalive but going through the motions of being human. Only they weren't. He knew now that as soon as they were born they were absorbed into the glob.

It really would be a new kind of humanity, with the babies growing up in the glob and never knowing anything else!

He walked across the messhall.

The crew were bodies carrying out necessary tasks in order to get the Starship to Alpha Centauri, and the real aliveness was somewhere else, different, very different from anything Barry could understand. And that made his loneliness even lonelier.

He stopped and looked at the mess table. The same table. And amazingly enough, nothing about it had been disturbed. Everything left just the way it had been left so many years before. How many years? He sat down. How long measured by any

kind of time that could make any sense to a man? He couldn't figure it out. It didn't make any difference now anyway. It was just another one of the things that a man couldn't afford to think about.

The table, the glasses still on it, the butts of cigarettes, the cards, the poker hands unplayed, the chips.

Nothing touched. Billings had been winning. Billings always won. That was when it had happened. Barry remembered hazily now, that last poker game, when they had found out they could share thoughts, when no secrets could be kept from one another any longer, when everyone realized just how afraid and close to madness everyone was, realized that the shared escape from it was inevitable.

They hadn't finished the poker game. People sharing one another's thoughts couldn't very well play poker again.

But Barry had fought it all the way. He picked up the hand he had dropped light years before. Then he dropped the cards on the floor and his hand was shaking. He still felt that it had been better then—each man holding his own secret hand.

He hesitated; then walked to the viewport and looked out.

6,000 miles per second, the energy of nuclear reaction, light years gone, light years to go, and nothing in-between, and more and more of the same, darkness, nothing going by. He felt the endless cold and the dark, right through the thick aluminial hull. He felt the cold and dark that had no appreciable end, or beginning, or middle—no break in it ever for him.

Like the cold, the darkness reflected nothing back to him, and a man had to have mirrors. But here, a look out the window went on out, kept going out and never came back to show a man where or what he was.

Barry walked back to the library, and Gabriel gave him a mechanical and thoroughly meaningless smile. Knowing he would never see it again, he took one long look at her slim and lovely body, and then he folded his arms on the desk and carefully placed his forehead on them and closed his eyes.

“Let me in!” he whispered. “Let me in!”

This time there was no struggle. It was like a drop of water falling into the sea.