

SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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TWO NOVELS OF TOMORROW

- DEATH QUOTIENT** John D. MacDonald 8
 "You must lay down your arms . . . because before the week is out, this planet will be no more!"
- THE EARTH KILLERS** A. E. van Vogt 50
 Eye to eye with Earth's most terrible destroyer, Morlake absorbed the knowledge that branded him "Traitor!"

TWO SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELETTES

- DHACTWHU!—REMEMBER?** Wilfred Owen Morley and Jacques Erman 84
 You must remember—for the destiny of the race lies in your hands!
- SON OF THE STARS** F. Orlin Tremaine 110
 Once you entered the Door, that valley was the Universe!

FOUR SHORT STORIES

- I, MARS** Ray Bradbury 35
 Barton's younger selves lived on, tormenting him for his living proof that their hopes were dead!
- All OUR YESTERDAYS** John Wade Farrell 42
 It was strange that of these two men, separated by centuries, one must die for the other!
- DARKSIDE DESTINY** James MacCreigh 75
 "Tonight you must solve the secret written in the moon's eternal stone—or die!"
- DELUSION DRIVE** Peter Reed 100
 The Kid didn't know that once in the Space Ship, you're dead—or only a grey thought in the mind of a machine!

DEPARTMENTS AND FEATURES

- FANDOM'S CORNER** Conducted by James V. Taurasi 6
- THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER** .. Conducted by Frederik Pohl 72
- MISSIVES AND MISSILES** The Readers 105
- LAWRENCE PORTFOLIO** 109

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I, MARS

by

Ray Bradbury

Alone on Mars, yet not alone . . . For old Barton's younger selves lived on, hating, tormenting him for his living proof that their hopes were dead!

THE phone rang.
A grey hand lifted the receiver.
"Hello?"
"Hello, Barton?"
"Yes,"
"This is Barton!"
"What?"

"This is Barton!"

"It can't be. This phone hasn't rung in twenty years."

The old man hung up.

Brrrrinnng!

His grey hand seized the phone.

"Hello, Barton," laughed the voice. "You have forgotten, haven't you?"

The old man felt his heart grow small and like a cool stone. He felt the wind blowing in off the dry Martian seas and the blue hills of Mars. After twenty years of silence and cobwebs and now, tonight, on his eightieth birthday, with a ghastly scream, this phone had wailed to life.

"Who did you think it was?" said the voice. "A rocket captain? Did you think someone had come to rescue you?"

"No."

"What's the date?"

Numbly, "July 20th, 2097."

"Good Lord. Sixty years! Have you been sitting there that long? Waiting for a rocket to come from Earth to rescue you?"

The old man nodded.

"Now, old man, do you know who I am? Think!"

"Yes." The dry pale lips trembling. "I understand. I remember. We are one. I am Emil Barton and you are Emil Barton."

"With one difference. You are eighty. I am only twenty. All of life before me!"

The old man began to laugh and then to cry. He sat holding the phone like a lost and silly child in his fingers. The conversation was impossible, and should not be continued, and yet he went on with it. When he got hold of himself he held the phone close to his withered lips and said, in deepest anguish, "Listen! You there! Listen, oh God, if I could warn you! How can I? You're only a voice. If I could

show you how lonely the years are. End it, kill yourself! Don't wait! If you knew what it is to change from the thing you are to the thing that is me, today, here, now, at this end."

"Impossible." The voice of the young Barton laughed, far away. "I've no way to tell if you ever get this call. This is all mechanical. You're talking to a transcription, no more. This is 2037. Sixty years in your past. Today, the atom war started on Earth. All colonials were called home from Mars, by rocket. I got left behind!"

"I remember," whispered the old man.

"Alone on Mars," laughed the young voice. "A month, a year, who cares? There are foods and books. In my spare time I've made transcription libraries of ten thousand words, responses, my voice, connected to phone relays. In later months I'll call, have someone to talk with."

"Yes," murmured the old man, remembering.

"Forty-sixty years from now my own transcripto-tapes will ring me up. I don't really think I'll be here on Mars that long, it's just a beautifully ironic idea of mine, something to pass the time. Is that really you, Barton? Is that really me?"

Tears fell from the old man's eyes. "Yes!"

"I've made a thousand Bartons, tapes, sensitive to all questions, my voice, in one thousand Martian towns. An army of Bartons over Mars, while I wait for the rockets to return."

"You fool," the old man shook his head, wearily. "You waited sixty years. You grew old waiting, always alone. And now you've become me and you're still alone in the empty cities."

"Don't expect my sympathy. You're like a stranger, off in another country.

I can't be sad. I'm alive when I make these tapes. And you're alive when you hear them. Both of us, to the other, incomprehensible. Neither can warn the other, even though both respond, one to the other, one automatically, the other warmly and humanly. I'm human now. You're human later. It's insane. I can't cry, because not knowing the future I can only be optimistic. These hidden tapes can only react to a certain number of stimuli from you. Can you ask a dead man to weep?"

"Stop it!" cried the old man, for his heart was sickening in him. He felt the familiar great seizures of pain. Nausea moved through him, and blackness. "Stop it! Oh God, but you were heartless. Go away!"

"Were, old man? I am. As long as the tapes glide on, as long as secret spindles and hidden electronic eyes read and select and convert words to send to you, I'll be young, cruel, blunt. I'll go on being young and cruel long after you're dead. Goodby."

"Wait!" cried the old man.

Click.

BARTON sat holding the silent phone a long while. His heart gave him intense pain.

What insanity it had been. In youth's flush, how silly, how inspired, those first secluded years, fixing the telephonic brains, the tapes, the circuits, scheduling calls on time relays:

Brrrrinnng!

"Morning, Barton. This is Barton. Seven o'clock. Rise and shine!"

Brrrrinnng!

"Barton? Barton calling. You're to go to Mars Town at noon. Install a telephonic brain. Thought I'd remind you."

"Thanks."

Brrrrinnng!

"Barton? Barton. Have lunch with me? The Rocket Inn?" ..

"Right."

"See you. So long!"

Brrrrinnng!

"That you, B.? Thought I'd cheer you. Firm chin, and all that. The rescue rocket might come tomorrow, to save you."

"Yes, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow."

Click.

But forty years had burned into smoke. Barton had muted the insidious phones and their clever, clever repartee. He had sealed them into silences. They were to call him only after he was eighty, if he still lived. And now today, the phones ringing, and the past breathing in his ear, sighing, whispering, murmuring, and remembering.

Brrrrinnng!

He let it ring.

"I don't have to answer it," he thought.

Brrrrinnng!

"There's no one there at all," he thought.

Brrrrinnng!

"It's like talking to yourself," he thought. "But different. Oh God, how different."

He felt his hands crawl unconsciously toward the phone.

Click.

"Hello, old Barton, this is young Barton. One year older, though. I'm twenty-one today. In the last year I've put voice brains in two hundred towns on Mars, I've populated it with arrogant Bartons!"

"Yes." The old man remembered those days six decades ago, those nights of rushing over blue hills and into iron valleys of Mars, with a truckful of machinery, whistling, happy. Another telephone, another relay.

Something to do. Something clever and wonderful and sad. Hidden voices. Hidden, hidden. In those young days when death was not death, time was not time, old age a faint echo from the long blue cavern of years ahead. That young idiot, that sadistic fool, never thinking to reap the harvest so sown.

"Last night," said Barton, aged twenty-one, "I sat alone in a movie theater in an empty town. I played an old Laurel and Hardy. Laughed so much. God, how I laughed."

"Yes."

"I got an idea today. I recorded my voice one thousand times on one tape. Broadcast from the town, it sounds like a thousand people living there. A comforting noise, the noise of a crowd. I fixed it so doors slam in town, children sing, music boxes play, all by clock-works. If I don't look out the window, if I just listen, it's all right. But if I look, it spoils the illusion. There's only one solution. I'll populate the town with robots. I guess I'm getting lonely."

The old man said, "Yes. That was your first sign."

"What?"

"The first time you admitted you were lonely."

"I've experimented with smells. As I walk down the deserted streets, the smells of bacon and eggs, ham steak, filets, soups, come from the houses. All done with hidden machines. Clever?"

"Fantasy. Madness."

"Self-protection, old man."

"I'm tired." Abruptly, the old man hung up. It was too much. The past pouring over him, drowning him. . . .

Swaying, he moved down the tower stairs to the streets of the town.

The town was dark. No longer did red neons burn, music play, or cooking smells linger. Long ago he had aban-

doned the grim fantasy of the mechanical lie. Listen! Are those footsteps? Smell! Isn't that strawberry pie! No, he had stopped it all. What had he done with the robots? His mind puzzled. Oh, yes. . . .

He moved to the dark canal where the stars shone in the quivering waters.

Underwater, in row after fish-like row, rusting, were the robot populations of Mars he had constructed over the years, and, in a wild realization of his own insane inadequacy, had commanded to march, one two three four! into the canal deeps, plunging, bubbling like sunken bottles. He had killed them and shown no remorse.

BRRRRINNNNG.

Faintly a phone rang in a lightless cottage.

He walked on. The phone ceased.

Brrrrinnng. Another cottage ahead, as if it knew of his passing. He began to run. The ringing stayed behind. Only to be taken up by a ringing from now this house—**Brrrrinnng!** now that, now here, there! He turned the corner. A phone! He darted on. Another corner. Another phone!

"All right, all right!" he shrieked, exhausted: "I'm coming!"

"Hello, Barton."

"What do you want!"

"I'm lonely. I only live when I speak. So I must speak. You can't shut me up forever."

"Leave me alone!" said the old man, in horror. "Oh, my heart!"

"This is Barton, age twenty-four. Another couple of years gone. Waiting. A little lonelier. I've read **War and Peace**, drunk sherry, run restaurants with myself as waiter, cook, entertainer. And tonight, I star in a film at the Tivoli—Emil Barton in **Love's Labor Lost**, playing all the parts, some with wigs, myself!"

"Stop calling me," the old man's eyes were fiery and insane. "Or I'll kill you!"

"You can't kill me. You'll have to find me, first!"

"I'll find you!" A choking.

"You've forgotten where you hid me. I'm everywhere in Mars, in boxes, in houses, in cables, towers, underground! Go ahead, try! What'll you call it? Telecide? Suicide? Jealous, are you? Jealous of me here, only twenty - four, bright - eyed, strong, young, young, young? All right, old man, it's war! Between us. Between me! A whole regiment of us, all ages from twenty to sixty, against you, the real one. Go ahead, declare war!"

"I'll kill you!" screamed Barton.

Click. Silence.

"Kill you!" He threw the phone out the window, shrieking.

In the midnight cold, the ancient automobile moved in deep valleys. Under Barton's feet on the floorboard were revolvers, rifles, dynamite. The roar of the car was in his thin, tired bones.

I'll find them, he thought. Find and destroy, all of them. Oh, God, God, how can he do this to me?

He stopped the car. A strange town lay under the late twin moons. There was no wind.

He held the rifle in his cold hands.

He peered at the poles, the towers, the boxes. Where? Where was this town's voice hidden? That tower? Or that one there! Where! So many years ago. So long gone. So forgotten. He turned his head now this way, now that, wildly. It must be that tower! Was he certain? Or this box here, or the transformer half up that tower!

He raised the rifle.

The tower fell with the first bullet.

All of them, he thought. All of the towers in this town will have to be cut apart. I've forgotten. Too long.

The car moved along the silent street.

Brrrrinnng!

He looked at the deserted drugstore.

Brrrrinnng!

Pistol in hand, he shot the lock off the door, and entered.

Click.

"Hello, Barton? Just a warning. Don't try to rip down all the towers, blow things up. Cut your own throat that way. Think it over . . ."

Click.

He stepped out of the phone booth slowly and moved into the street and listened to the telephone towers humming high in the air, still alive, still untouched. He looked at them and then he understood.

He could not destroy the towers. Suppose a rocket came from Earth,

impossible idea, but suppose it came tonight, tomorrow, next week? and landed on the other side of the planet, and used the phones to try to call Barton, only to find the circuits dead? Yes, imagine!

Barton dropped his gun.

"A rocket won't come," he argued, softly, logically with himself. "I'm old. It won't come now. It's too late."

But suppose it came, and you never knew, he thought. No, you've got to keep the lines open.

Brrrrinnng.

HE TURNED dully. His eyes were blinking and not seeing.

He shuffled back into the drug-store and fumbled with the receiver.

"Hello?" A strange voice.

"Please," pleaded the old man, brokenly. "Don't bother me."

"Who's this, who's there? Who is it? Where are you?" cried the voice, surprised.

"Wait a minute." The old man staggered. "This is Emil Barton, who's that?"

"This is Captain Leonard Rockwell, Earth Rocket 48. Just arrived from New York."

"No, no, no."

"Are you there, Mr. Barton?"

"No, no, it can't be, it just can't."

"Where are you?"

"You're lying, it's false!" The old man had to lean against the booth wall. His blue eyes were cold blind. "It's you, Barton, making, making fun of me, lying to me again!"

"This is Captain Rockwell, Rocket 48. Just landed in New Schenecty. Where are you?"

"In Green Town," he gasped.

"That's a thousand miles from you."

"Look, Barton, can you come here?"

"What?"

"We've repairs on our rocket. Ex-

hausted from the flight. Can you come help?"

"Yes, yes."

"We're at the tamac outside town. Can you rush by tomorrow?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well?"

The old man petted the phone, pitifully. "How's Earth? How's New York? Is the war over? Who's President now? What happened?"

"Plenty of time for gossip when you arrive."

"Is everything fine?"

"Fine."

"Thank God." The old man listened to the far voice. "Are you sure you're Captain Rockwell?"

"Damn it, man!"

"I'm sorry!"

He hung up and ran.

They were here, after many years, unbelievable, his own, who would take him back to Earth seas and skies and mountains.

He started the car. He would drive all night. Could he do it? What of his heart—It would be worth a risk, to see people, to shake hands, to hear them near you.

The car thundered in the hills.

That voice. Captain Rockwell. It couldn't be himself, forty years ago. He had never made a recording like that. Or had he? In one of his depressive fits, in a spell of drunken cynicism, hadn't he once made a false tape of a false landing on Mars with a synthetic captain, an imaginary crew? He jerked his grey head, savagely. No. He was a suspicious fool. Now was no time to doubt. He must run under the moons of Mars, hour on hour. What a party they would have!

The sun rose. He was immensely tired, full of thorns and brambles of weakness, his heart plunging and aching, his fingers fumbling the wheel,

but the thing that pleased him most was the thought of one last phone call: Hello, young Barton, this is old barton. I'm leaving for Earth today! Rescued! He chuckled weakly.

He drove into the shadowy limits of New Schenectady at sundown. Stepping from his car he stood staring at the rocket tarmac, rubbing his reddened eyes.

The rocket field was empty. No one ran to meet him. No one shook his hand, shouted, or laughed.

He felt his heart roar into pain. He knew blackness and a sensation of falling through the open sky. He stumbled toward an office.

Inside, six phones sat in a neat row.

He waited, gasping.

Finally:

Brrrrriinnng.

He lifted the heavy receiver.

A voice said, "I was wondering if you'd get there alive."

The old man did not speak but stood with the phone in his hands.

The voice continued, "An elaborate joke. Captain Rockwell reporting for duty, sir. Your orders, sir?"

"You," groaned the old man.

"How's your heart, old man?"

"No!"

"Hoped the trip would kill you. Had to eliminate you some way, so I could live, if you call a transcription living."

"I'm going out now," replied the old man, "and blow it all up. I don't care. I'll blow up everything until you're all dead!"

"You haven't the strength. Why do you think I had you travel so far, so fast? This is your last trip!"

The old man felt his heart falter. He would never make the other towns. The war was lost. He slid into a chair and made low sobbing, mournful noises from his loose mouth. He glared at the five other, silent phones. As if

at a signal, they burst into silver chorus! A nest of ugly birds screaming!

Automatic receivers popped up.

The office whirled. "Barton, Barton, Barton!"

He throttled the phone in his hands. The voice, the youth, the time of long ago. He mashed, choked it and still it laughed at him. He throttled it. He beat it. He kicked at it. He hated it with hands and mouth and blind raging eye. He furled the hot wire like serpentine in his fingers, ripped it into red bits which fell about his stumbling feet.

He destroyed three other phones. There was a sudden silence.

And as if his body now discovered a thing which it had long kept secret, it seemed to decay upon his tired bones. The flesh of his eyelids fell away like flower petals. His mouth became a withered rose. The lobes of his ears melting wax. He pushed his chest with his hands and fell face down. He lay still. His breathing stopped. His heart stopped.

After a long spell, the remaining two phones rang.

Twice. Three times.

A relay snapped somewhere. The two phone voices were connected, one to the other.

"Hello, Barton?"

"Yes, Barton?"

"Aged twenty-four."

"I'm twenty-six. We're both young. What's happened?"

"I don't know. Listen."

The silent rom. The old man did not stir on the floor. The wind blew in the broken window. The air was cool.

"Congratulate me, Barton, this is my twenty-sixth birthday!"

"Congratulations!"

Laughter drifted out the window into the dead city.