

Freedom

Barnard peered through his plexiglass cage window. Earth was billions of miles behind, just another rock in space.

"Look forward," he told himself, *"look forward."*

Tomorrow they would arrive on Cygna. Barnard could already see himself on his new home world, free to move about, breathe fresh air, delight in new friends.

A man just ahead of him in his own isolation cage turned to him.

"Two years. Been a hell of a long time."

"Yeah," Barnard said, nervously tapping the window. "You think it'll be worth it?"

"Aw, hell yeah. You?"

Barnard sighed, reliving the forced isolation. "Couldn't be any worse."

Two years on a spaceship to escape Earth's isolation, the loneliness, the complete absence of human contact, the debilitating effects on the mind. Barnard dreamed of interacting with humans, face to face, cheek to cheek even. He'd forgotten what it felt like, sitting next to a pretty girl, close enough to enjoy her sweet perfume. Twenty-two years since the virus took hold. No treatment, no cure, no vaccine. It mandated complete and total isolation.

The government of Cygna had suggested the exchange. Barnard was one of the lucky 4,000 that would make the inaugural trip to live permanently on Cygna, or "Earth 2.0", where he could work in an office, surrounded by flesh-and-blood humans. No more virtual dates, lame fist bumps, or full-face masks everyone on Earth wore.

On Cygna they had been dealing with their own virus for three generations. When people with the virus came within two feet of each other, the virus ceased to be deadly. This required Cygna's citizens to live close; Cygnites were ordered to practice "social harboring".

Then scientists discovered that when the two planets' populations were blended, both viruses died. So was born the citizen exchange program. The first chosen were the most desperate, like Barnard, who suffered extreme bouts of depression. *"No more. The cure approaches!"* he convinced himself.

The ship touched down under the glow of Cygna's two suns. Stunned Earthlings walked lightly and cautiously out of the ship, down the ramp to the Spaceport terminal. Many, including Barnard, cried as they stood alongside other human beings for the first time in more than two decades. They moved past a glass room crowded with Cygnites awaiting their own two-year journey to Earth.

"Boy," said Barnard, pointing his thumb to the caged passengers, "They don't know the horror they're in for on Earth."

A Customs officer stamped Barnard's papers and handed him a *Welcome Packet*. He noticed that her uniform fabric was impossibly thin; it was almost indecent.

"Here is a phone, and this is your new address. Any questions?"

"N...No. Just rarin' to get out there!" Barnard said, too loudly.

"Welcome to Cygna."

Barnard walked outside to a crush of people.

"Ah, in the midst of mankind once again!" He breathed deeply and pushed his way toward a taxi stand. A woman of about 25 brushed by him. "*I could get used to this.*"

People jockeyed to pile inside the taxis, 8-10 in each. Two young men sat on the hood.

"I'll walk," Barnard said to no one but himself. He got his bearings and headed for downtown Uber York. Hundreds of his new fellow Cygnites walked with him, en masse, filling in all space around him. When someone peeled off, another immediately took their place. The thin air was stale and stagnant.

Barnard's mouth twitched as he walked. The aroma of his new brethren stabbed his nose; not everyone wore cologne, or showered. At least he could smell them, something he told himself he missed, despite his queasy stomach. Across the street a steady stream of people moved together in the opposite direction. The swarm of humans went on for as far as his eye could see. A bit of the old anxiety crept in.

Reaching the city-center, Barnard marveled at the openness of...everything. Shops had no windows, no doors. Restaurants were open spaces, with a kitchen in the middle and as many tables as possible stuffed into the space. Diners sat elbow-to-elbow. Barnard tried to stop and look around, but the crush of people pushed him onward.

A few blocks down the road he pressed into a busy, noisy coffeeshop. There were no lines. Bodies were crowded up to the counter, some even stood behind the counter, impeding the work of the shop's employees, who seemed to take it in stride.

"You! You're next," said a woman standing at a sales terminal. "What'll you have?"

Barnard shouted above the din, "Uh, a coffee, with cream."

A cup of coffee appeared on the counter. He picked up the cup and was moving it to his mouth when an arm knocked the cup out of his hand. Barnard looked down, but the cup had disappeared.

"You new here?"

Barnard jumped. He looked up. He was nose to nose with a man of about 50, so close he could taste the man's lox and onion lunch. He gagged.

"Uh, just arrived."

"You have to keep your elbows in. You'll adjust – in time." The man disappeared into the throng.

Barnard decided he could do without the coffee. *"Gosh, didn't quite expect this."*

On the street Barnard was once again dragged forward by the horde. He was aware of countless conversations. Many spoke directly into his ears, a human cacophony; it invaded his brain, preventing thought.

"Yeah! So when she arrived...yessir, I'm headed that way now and should...Marta is no longer...he died last week...fat little...church! Are you out of...she was putty in..."

Ignoring his shaking hands, Barnard convinced himself he relished that people on Cygna could hold face-to-face conversations. *"That'll be me, soon."*

Scurrying along, he stepped in a pile of poop.

"Funny, I haven't seen any dogs."

He then noticed a man on his left slinging gallons of flop-sweat. Attempting to avoid the impromptu shower, he careened into a woman, who turned and berated him with the proverbial language of a sailor.

"!@#%\$^& !#@*^&\$%"*

Finally reaching his new home, Barnard removed himself from the crowd. His legs were wobbly and he was sweating, himself. He verified the address. *"Strange, there's no apartment number."*

He walked up the building's ramp. There was no entrance door, only an open space to pass through. Inside, the entire floor was one, large, open room without interior walls, windows, or doors. It was crammed with people. Every chair, every sofa, every square foot of floor space was occupied. Televisions blared all manner of programming. Music emanated from various speakers. Children pushed their way around, screaming, crying. A group of men sat playing video games, several in their underwear. One wore even less.

"Okay. Okay." Barnard was now talking aloud to himself. "They said it was different here. Just have to get used to it. And I will." His voice was shrill; his head was spinning. He glanced in a corner and saw several couples having sex on several beds lined along a wall. "Oh, God."

He headed for the bathroom. It was just another part of the open room, with toilets, sinks, and showers, mostly occupied, sometimes by two or three persons. He approached an open toilet, then willed himself to drop his pants. An attractive young woman sat on the adjacent toilet, swiping through recipes. She shoved her tablet in front of Barnard. "Would you enjoy this casserole? I'm thinking of it for my husband, Jason. Hey, you're new. I'm Jennifer. I live here. Jason lives upstairs but we've been promised a place together in the next few years."

Embarrassed and shy, Barnard turned away. Standing to his left was a man with his pants down around his ankles.

"Come on, man, shit or get off the pot."

Barnard vomited on the man, then before he had another thought he yanked his pants up and ran out of the building, knocking down several of his neighbors. He frantically pushed and shoved his way toward the Spaceport, then ran inside the terminal. He approached a Spaceport Security officer.

“Has the ship left for Earth?”

“Two minutes.”

“How do I get on it?”

“Sorry, they’re just pulling away the ramp.”

“Nooooo!”

Barnard shoved past the officer and made his way into the waiting room for passengers going to Earth. It was empty.

He ran to the locked glass door as the ship moved into launch position. The engines fired and the ship rose off the ground. It would not return for four years.

Barnard pounded his fists on the glass. “Don’t leave me here. Please don’t leave...” He slowly inched down, collapsed on the floor, and sobbed.

On the spaceship a young woman looked through her isolation cage window as the ship moved out from Cygna’s orbit. She could see 150 billion Cygnites scurry around, like tiny ants on an isolated mound of dirt.

The traveler in front of her said, “Two years to Earth. Think it will be worth it?”

She looked out the window again and sighed.

“Couldn’t be any worse.”