

Like many SF writers, Mr. Young has worked at many jobs—with the possible exception of construction work on the slopes of Olympus Mons. But then, who are we to say for sure...?

I am from Mars.

I say this because I spent ten years there helping to build the domed complex for the first American colony.

Not years as they are measured on Mars, but years as they are measured on Earth. But even Earth years can be long.

Yes. Ten long years.

Most people stare at me when I tell them this. They think I am crazy. Why would anyone in his right mind voluntarily spend ten long years on Mars?

The answer is simple: For the money.

And for the priority. I can name any civil-service job I want and it will be mine for the asking.

Well, the complex is built now, and I am back on the planet I came from. I am forever free from the bitter winds of Mars, from the bleak Martian landscapes; from the slow relentless rising of Olympus Mons that confronted me each morning when I crawled outside my air tent.

I am back now in the land where I was born. Back in the little town that once for me was the whole wide world. I am back where I belong.

"Gosh, you look great," my father says as we shake hands. My mother kisses me. "It's wonderful to have you home."

My uncle, who has stopped in because of my return, asks, "What are your plans now, Neil?"

I shake my head. "I just want to rest for a while."

"I don't blame you!" says my father. "Working all those years on that damned complex!"

"What are they going to use it for?" asks my mother.

"People are going to live there."

"Crazy people," my uncle remarks.

I nod. "I guess you're right."

It is summer, and I like the way our backyard looks from the window of my upstairs room. It is a vivid green from the last rain, and patterned with beds of my mother's flowers. My father must have recently cut the grass, for it is carpet-flat, with not a weed protruding. There is a white fence around the backyard. It is freshly painted.

I feel that I must belong here. In this middle-class neighborhood. In this small middle-class town. On Mars I often dreamed of the town and the house and the backyard. Of my room up under the eaves. When they asked me if I would like to stay and become part of the colony, I laughed at them.

They can shove Mars.

I can hear the voices of my mother and my father and my uncle coming from downstairs. Presently I hear a different voice. A vaguely familiar one. It is rich and full, like afternoon sunlight. "Neil, you've got company," my mother calls up the stairs.

I go down to the living room. Yes, it is she. Judy. Judy Dalms. She runs over and kisses me. The scent of her is all around me, and oddly it is this that I remember most. More than her titian hair and dark-blue gaze. More than the dimple in her right cheek. More than her demure smile. We were lovers long ago. But she should not have kissed me. It has been too many years.

And surely she must be married by now.

We go walking. Around the block. It is afternoon and a warm wind is coming down from the green hills that rise beyond the lowlands. The wind is in her hair, in her walk, in her words. "Yes. I was married. But not any more."

She has three kids. Suzan, Kevin and Carl. The two boys are dying to meet me. They want to go to Mars. "I told them all about you," Judy says.

"Why do they want to go to Mars?"

"You know kids."

"They'll grow up."

"What are your plans now, Neil?" "I haven't any."

"You have priority on any government job you want."

"It was part of the package."

"I'm a working girl now. I work days at the supermarket and nights at the show. I took today off."

"Two jobs?"

"Three kids. You know how it is."

I do not know. "Your ex-husband—he must give you some support."

"Once in a blue moon I get a check."

We arrive presently back in front of my parents' house. Judy's electricar is parked at the curb. It is a tiny stationwagon. She gets behind the wheel. "Are you working at the show tonight?" I ask.

"It's only a weekend job."

"Maybe I'll drop by to meet your kids."

"They'll draw and quarter me if you don't."

"Where do you live now?"

"Where I used to. Mother's and Dad's."

My father is on vacation. We drive downtown for a beer. The business section has changed but little; it is a dual succession of block-like buildings with papier-mache façades. The gin mill I used to go to has been transformed into a clothing store. We go to Big Charlie's. I remember him vaguely, and we shake hands. It is a dead time of day and there are only a few patrons, none of whom I know.

Charlie no longer waits on trade and has a barmaid behind the bar. She knows my father. "Day off, George?" she asks.

"Vacation," my father says.

"What're you doing? Painting your house?"

My father introduces me to her. Pat. I judge her to be about my age, but she does not show her years. She is slender at first glance, but then you begin to see the fullness of her hips and breasts. She has brown eyes which somehow are not in accord with her light blond hair, which is swept back and falls below her shoulders in meticulous braids. She tells me she used to be an ecdysiast. I wonder how she guessed my father is painting the house. It is true he is not painting it yet, but he is going to. I know, because I saw a ladder in the side yard and cans of paint on the back porch.

She buys us a drink because I have been to Mars. "You don't look like a Martian," she says. "Why'd you come back?"

"To help my father paint the house."

"I was right then. He is painting it."

"Naturally. He's on vacation."

My mother has roast beef for supper. I wish she had not gone to the expense of buying real meat. She has made applejohn for dessert. She remembers how I loved it. It tastes strange now. Rations do something to your taste buds, although our Martian rations were good.

My aunt and uncle dine with us. "What are your plans, Neil?" my uncle asks again.

I shrug and say I haven't any.

My father has not asked me yet. But he will get to it soon.

I watch 3V for a while, then shower and shave and get into slacks and shirt and shoes from my pre-Martian days, and head for the Dalms' house. It is not far, I cover the distance easily. I am fully reaccustomed by this time to Earth's greater gravitation. The two boys are in the front yard. I must look like a Martian to them, for they run into the house, crying, "Mom, he's here, he's here!"

Judy meets me at the door and we go inside. She insists that I have coffee. Carl is seven, Kevin five. The little girl Suzan is only three. They are beautiful children; all of them have Judy's eyes. Carl wants to know what it is like on Mars. I tell him and Kevin about the Margaritifer Sinus, Tharsis Ridge—where the complex is located—and massive Olympus Mons. I tell them that the sky is yellowish pink instead of blue. To temper their fascination I tell them about the cold and bitter winds, and how "Martians" have to wear air masks whenever they are outdoors.

"Aren't there any real Martians?" Carl asks.

"I'm afraid there aren't."

"But weren't there Martians long ago?"

"There may have been. But they left no sign of themselves."

"I don't think I'd care to go there," Judy says.

"I would," says Carl.

"So would I," says Kevin.

"Don't worry about it," I tell Judy after they have gone to bed. "When they get older, they'll know better."

"You didn't."

"That's because I never grew up."

But this is not true. I went to Mars for the security it would give me on Earth.

We sit on the sofa, watching 3V. We have the house to ourselves, except for the kids. Her father also is on vacation, and he and her mother are spending two weeks at the Thousand Islands. Their house does not need painting. I am tempted to ask Judy whether her father painted it while on vacation last year, but I do not. I am not making a study of middle-class customs. It is immaterial to me when people paint their houses.

I know that if I say the word, or even hint that I am so inclined, Judy will take me upstairs to her room. I do neither. It is not that I do not want her, how could I help but want her after being without a woman so long? But there is a strange coldness in me that will not go away.

We kiss in the doorway when we say good-night, and she puts her arms around my neck. There is no coldness in her, but clearly she feels mine, for she draws away. I walk home beneath the summer stars.

I begin helping my father paint the house. When he finally asks me what my plans are, he does not do so directly. He says casually, as I am cutting a window sash, "There's a civil service exam for postal workers coming up in two weeks."

I do not say anything.

"For you it would just be a token, of course. Your priority automatically puts you first on the list. You wouldn't even have to pass." "I could pass the damn thing."

"I know you could. The point is, you have to take it for your priority to work. Then, as soon as there's an opening, you'll be safe."

"Safe?"

"Security-wise. I know you've got a bundle from being on Mars, but it's not the same as a secure job, and what with the price of things who knows how long your money will last? This way, you'll be all set for life."

I say nothing more.

I stop into Big Charlie's one night for a beer. I run into people I used to know. Guys I went to school

with. They all have pretty much the same thing to say—how they wish they'd gone to Mars. I tell them they still can if they want—that the Colonization Bureau is looking for volunteers. Oh, but they can't go now, they tell me, they're married and have kids. I tell them they can take their wives and kids with them, and they look at me as though I am out of my mind.

Pat is behind the bar. Tonight she has red hair. I marvel at how young she looks when her eyes tell me she is my age. She is like a girl just graduated from high school. I remark on the color of her hair, and she says, smiling, that no one knows which of her hairdos is really her own hair. I marvel at her smile. It is warm and confidential, as though we have known each other for years.

I buy her a drink and she buys one back. "I'm helping my father paint the house," I tell her.

"You're right back in the groove."

"How in hell did you get far enough outside this damned deal to see what makes its wheels turn?"

"You don't have to get outside it to see."

"I had to."

She laughs. "The view from Mars. And here it was, all the time, in your own backyard."

She waits on another customer and comes back. There is no coldness in me when I look at her.

"What does Earth look like from far away?" she asks.

"It's a pretty blue star. What made you decide to take your clothes off for a living?"

"It gave me a charge."

"Nympho-exhibitionism?"

"I don't think so."

"Why did you stop?"

"I got married to a man who thought Christ was due back any day. He didn't want Christ to see me naked. It didn't work."

"You can start up again."

"I'm too old and fat."

"The moon is made of green cheese."

"I guess I don't want to start again. I go from town to town now, like I did before. Only now I only tend bar."

"On Mars when I got up mornings and went outside the first thing I'd see would be Olympus Mons."

"Tell me about it."

"It's like the state of Utah turned into a fifteen-mile high mountain. I thought I wanted to be free from it. Now, I don't know." "You're free from it whether you want to be or not."

"Yes. I guess I am. I have to leave now. I have to get up early to paint the back porch."

Judy calls on her next day off. She and the kids are going on a picnic. Carl and Kevin asked her to ask me if maybe I might like to come along. My father and I have the paint job beat by this time. I tell her okay.

She picks me up in her stationwagon. I can barely fit into it what with her and the three kids and the picnic basket. There is a state park five miles from town. Barbecues, picnic tables, bathhouses. The kids are ecstatic. They run around me, begging me to take them swimming. Especially Suzan, the little girl. I get into my suit and they get into theirs, Suzan with Judy's help, and I take them down to the beach while Judy gets one of the barbecues ready for grilling synthi-hot dogs and soy-bean burgers. Supervising the kids' activities gives me a proprietary air that I do not find altogether distasteful. I watch the little girl carefully. She squats in water half a foot deep and splashes delightedly. Carl and Kevin go out as far as they dare, to impress me. I tell them to swim closer to shore.

We eat at one of the picnic tables. It is a weekday, and we have the area pretty much to ourselves. It strikes me that Judy does not have a dog. "We had one," she tells me when I ask, "but it got run over. We're going to get another."

The kids grow sad at the mention of the dog. Spike, his name was. "We're getting an Irish setter this time," Judy says. "Although they cost an arm and a leg."

She has brought beer too. We sip it from biodegradable cans while the two boys play catch and

Suzan fingers arabesques in the sand. I ask Judy, "Didn't you bring your suit?"

"Yes. But we should wait an hour before we swim."

The hour drifts by, and then all of us head for the lake. Man and woman and kids. Gaiety and laughter and much splashing. No dog, but dog is on way.

The warm sunlight seems to have banished my coldness, and after we return from the picnic I spend the evening with Judy. She fixes a light supper of potato salad and synthi-cold cuts. She puts Suzan to bed early, and afterward I tell the two boys more about Mars. They are practically sitting on my knee, and yet they are far away. I cannot understand this, because they are such beautiful children. After Judy sends them off to bed she sits down on the sofa beside me. I put my arm around her shoulders. Instantly the coldness comes back. The alienness. We kiss, but I know it isn't any good, and presently I make a lame excuse and leave. After I walk home I stand in the backyard looking up at the stars. I make out Mars. It is an orange pinprick in the sedate sky. I turn the cart around, hoping to get a better view of myself. If there were Martians and one of them lived on Earth for a long enough time, would he become an Earthman? My inverse ratiocination takes me nowhere. I am in an unexplored area of extraterrestrial science. I leave Mars to rest in its celestial arbor, go inside and say good-night to my mother and father and go upstairs to bed.

My father has gone back to work at the post office. One evening he brings home an application for the upcoming civil-service exam. I fill it out dutifully and give it back to him. He has eleven years to go before he will be eligible for retirement. He is already looking forward to those years ahead. How shall he fill the long hours? He cannot paint the house every day. No doubt he will put in a vegetable garden. He has always had a farmer's thumb. There will be a kitchen garden in our backyard. And the house will gleam from innumerable coats of paint.

I touch Pat's hair. "Is it the real thing?"

"Why do you care?"

"Never mind why. Is it real?"

I have borrowed my father's car and we have gone to a drive-in and now we are parked on a bluff overlooking the lake. "Yes, it's real," Pat says.

"You have such nice hair. Why do you camouflage it with wigs?"

"To make myself diverse and fascinating. Charlie's trade has tripled since I've been here."

"They all ask you out over their beers, don't they?"

"The way you did."

"Yes. The way I did."

"Most of them do." She looks at me, and I can see starlight on her face and the faintest hint of it in her eyes. "You're the only one I said yes to."

"Because I'm from Mars?"

"Maybe that was why."

"You're from Mars too. In a way."

"Is that why you asked me out?"

"I guess it was partially why."

We kiss, and I taste starlight on her lips. There is a blanket in the trunk, and I get it out and we spread it on the ground. We lie down upon it side by side. There is the indrawn-breath sound of the waves below, and around us the light of stars. "It really is my real hair," she whispers in my ear. I wonder where my coldness went. My alienness. No, my alienness is still with me. I have an alien in my arms. Man and woman and lake and starlight. And Mars, high, high above. Man and woman. Making love.

"Judy called last night," my mother tells me as she fries my bacon. "She's such a nice girl."

"I'll have only one egg, Mom."

"She says she's having a cookout in her backyard tonight and the kids are hoping you'll be there."

Kevin and Carl and Suzan. And soy-bean burgers and synthi-hot dogs. And possibly

corn-on-the-cob. It is part of the intricate scheme of things. Job, wife, kids, pension. Middle classdom. Only when war comes does the pattern shift, and then never for long. God created Earth for the middle class.

Why did He create Mars?

I do not go to the cookout. I go to Big Charlie's. When Pat closes for the night we go to her apartment. I tell her of the application I filled out. "They can't turn me down."

"Is that really why you went to Mars?"

"It was one of the inducements they offered. I couldn't go to college—not many middle-class people can afford to any more. But civil service is the next best thing. The trouble is, there are too many applicants. You have to get in the side door somehow."

"When you get your vacation will you paint your house?"

"Naturally."

We are sitting side by side on her bed. "I guess I'm cynical. When you take off your clothes the world seems to take its off too."

"Is that your real hair?"

"You know it isn't."

She pulls the wig off and shakes her head and lets her soft brown hair fall free. There isn't a degree of coldness in me when we kiss.

"The examination," my father tells me, "is at nine A.M. tomorrow. In the post-office basement."

"Judy called again," says my mother. "You're invited to her place for dinner. Her mother and father are back and she wants you to meet them. And oh, yes, there was another call. From the Colonization Bureau. They want you to call back."

I make the call. They tell me the quota is not full yet and ask me if I have changed my mind. I tell them Hell no.

I go to Judy's for dinner. I meet her mother and father. They are much like mine. For the occasion her mother serves real pork chops. Judy has baked an apple pie. All the kids have two slices apiece. I have only one. But it is a good pie. As we sit there at the table the scene seems to freeze in my gaze. Judy, her mother and father and the kids all take on marmoreal lines. I am in a room with statues. Only I am real. And then it is all over and the statues turn back into middle-class Americans eating apple pie.

After dishes, Judy and I go out and sit on the front-porch steps. Judy says, "I hear there's a postal workers' exam tomorrow." "Yes."

"Your mother told me you're going to take it. I wish you luck." "I'm not going to take it. I'm going back."

She becomes fascinated by a pebble near her foot. She keeps pushing it back and forth with the toe of her shoe. At length she says, "I guess I should have known."

I do not say anything. There is nothing I can say.

"Do you *like* it up there?" she asks.

"I thought I hated it. I guess I was wrong."

I say good-bye to her, to her parents and the kids. The boys have stricken looks on their faces. I kiss the little girl. There is no coldness in me when I kiss her. She does not know yet she is of Earth.

I say good-bye to my mother and father. My father says he understands. He does not. My mother cries. They had everything all figured out for me. My aunt and uncle come in, and I shake hands with my uncle and kiss my aunt. My uncle keeps staring at me when he thinks I am not looking. He thinks I am quite mad.

I go to say good-bye to Pat. She comes out from behind the bar. "I'm going too," she says. "If there's room for me."

"They'll make room."

In her apartment, packing, she says, "There aren't any strings."

"Maybe I want there to be."

"There aren't any if you don't."

"Why are you going?"

"I want to belong somewhere."

"Mars will take its clothes off too."

"Not if I don't take off mine."

I like the starlight on her face when at last the shuttle lifts us up among the stars. It is a fine face. There is strength and resolution beneath its symmetrical lines. She will become a fine Martian. Among the faces of the volunteers I see faces I have known before. They are the faces of some of the men who built the domed complex beneath the Martian moons. We Martians are going home.