

# No-brainer

A short story by Bogi Beykov

I

It was raining again in Lincoln. That time of the year Nebraska was so wet, it was dirty. It was wetter than it was appropriate for a married woman to be in a swimming pool. But it was 1936 and people didn't complain that much about the weather. They didn't rage about it on their instagram lives or let their arthritis joint pain delay their morning chicken feeding routine. The only time anyone got *triggered* was right after they were *aimed at* and before they got *shot*. And there was only one type of depression people suffered from - it was called the Great Depression. Wherein if you didn't feel like getting up this morning, it was probably because you had eaten a rat for dinner the night before and your tummy was upset.

But Barry didn't eat a rat last night and that was his problem. He ate something known in its past life as a cow. He ate a concerningly big amount of it. Enough to cause deep insecurities in a pack of hypothetically by-standing wolves and ruin their sex lives for months.

Barry was a simple man. Simple like the life goals of an amoeba. Simple like the schedule of an African ski instructor. Yet somehow, he would always end up in the most complicated of conundrums. He would occasionally ponder this and many such mysteries infesting the universe. His thin lips would then involuntarily clench like the dry helpless butthole of an anorexic before a colonoscopy. His eyes would squint imitating focus poorly. His brow would frown like the foreskin of a non-Jewish long-distance swimmer. And all of this physically painful thinking would just make him sweat helplessly in frustration until a random nipple itch would bring him out of his trance.

He was in this very state when officer Ramsey was leading him through the gate of Nebraska State Penitentiary. He had never been in that particular situation before. And for killing his neighbor's cow? Really? It was a cow after all. Its very purpose was to be eaten at one point or another. And why would Mr. Kingsley even care? He had over 300 of those. How can you even count to that many? All of these questions made his head hurt. As a matter of fact, his head was in way too much pain ever since that unfortunate night. And there was hardly anything inside that could hurt anyway.

"Welcome, son," Ramsey growled in accompaniment to a firm pat between Barry's protruding shoulder blades. "Enjoy."

Barry was deposited, searched, signed in and with that - screwed more successfully than by Satan's own screwdriver.

"You'll get used to it. The food ain't bad either." This was Big Jack - his cellmate.

Barry was supposed to spend the next few years of his life falling asleep while counting Big Jack's snores and the occasional fart instead of sheep in cell number 38.

That first night Barry was sitting up on his lower bunk bed with his back against the wall playing with his cold toes, wondering which one they would cut off first whenever he got frostbite. His mind took him as far back as the time, he was a baby. He wondered why it was impossible now to stuff his foot in his mouth and warm it up better. If he only knew what would one day become of him, he would have kept practicing this ancient art of self-preservation.

And while the cold was slowly creeping up Barry's spine and his imagination was traveling through the farthest reaches of his mind, inspecting the very lines dividing the real world from his fantasies, a droplet of blood peeped out of his right nostril and traveled down in-between a few greasy hairs all the way to the brink of his cracked upper lip where it rested for a while.

It is not particularly common for such droplets to stay in one place for a moment or two and then circle around and travel back to one's nostril, yet this was exactly what happened with this one.

Because unbeknownst to Barry, this was no regular nose bleed.

It was merely an impromptu cortical fluid elevator assembled by a brave delegation from the colony of **Keplerians** currently living inside of Barry's brain.

Big Jack farted hard.

You could hear the vertebrae in his spine rattle. Barry would eventually learn the reliability and time-measurement qualities of those farts that would surprisingly wake up inmates in a 20 feet radius but not disturb Big Jack in the least.

With the sweet warmth of the drowsy fart wind, creeping into every exposed hole, Barry felt his eyelids stick to each other. Was that because of the sulfurous thiol molecules gluing them together? That was some real talent his cellmate had. Like a horned coot crafts its elaborate nest and like an expert pot smoker builds a bed-sheet out of rolling paper, Jack could probably stop a period with his fart. He could stitch together the Suez Canal. Hell, with enough beans and some steady wind, he could put Pangaea back together! He could probably...

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*"Alright, put sleep mode on. Time to go to work."*

*"Done, Captain!"*

*"Huh. Look how the sleeping neural connectivity is almost the same as when he is awake."*

*"Yeah, I see that. But why?"*

*"It looks like his brain works at the same capacity regardless of whether he is awake or sleeping."*

*"Hey Drol, look through his linguistic database. Maybe they have a word for it."*

*“Hold on. I guess it would be...I’m not sure how to pronounce it...**imbecile**?”*

*“**Imbecile**. I see.”*

*“I don’t think we have ever encountered any **imbecilae** before, Captain.”*

*“It must be a rare condition, Ori. Never mind. We know what to do. We have a few hours to get a grip on the controllers, learn as much as possible about the environment - remember, we want to know if there are any immediate dangers. Natural predators. Something perhaps that feasts on **imbecilae**. By the time he wakes up, we need to have full command.”*

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*“I swear to God, I had the strangest dream ever.”*

*“Oh yeah? Think about it when you get raped in the showers next time.”*

That was simultaneously the end of Barry’s morning attempt to start a conversation with his cellmate and the end of any hope he had of keeping up with his hygiene for the remainder of his sentence. A sentence of five years for stealing and killing his neighbor’s cow. People were already playing the electric guitar, using microscopes and the Nazis were planning the construction of a second base on the dark side of the Moon, meanwhile, Barry got punished in a Biblical way for his Old Testament sin deep in the heart of Nebraska. Wasn’t it Jesus himself who said, “Let anyone among you who has never eaten another man’s cow, be the first to throw a stone at Barry?”

And it felt like his head was stoned already. Otherwise, how would you explain his unusual behavior of carefully watching every guard and taking mental notes of their routines as well as trying to figure out the dominance patterns of the established prison alpha males and map their territory? He didn’t even know any of these things yesterday.

There is a strange thing about the human psyche. We try to backward rationalize any behavior no matter how alien it is. It’s much harder for us to accept, we might have lost our minds.

That’s why it took Barry some time. Some time to realize that while he was pretending to have a conversation with someone in the dining room, he was actually counting some guard’s steps to estimate the length of the corridor leading out and calculate the size of the frame on his escape window. He would never do such silly things in the past. Having a conversation was difficult enough, let alone mimicking one. Also, why did he sniff his food before eating? How would he know the distinct smell of Martian perchlorates, the presence of which he was carefully trying to detect, and that they would literally make him shit his brains out? Yep, he’d lost his mind. That and the dream of lush grass fields, and the headaches. He made the firm decision in some corner of his brain to set aside some time in the afternoon and feel sorry about himself. But first he knew with certainty, he never had experienced in his life before, that his interactions today should focus on extracting information on possible angles of manipulation of every guard and top three ways to blackmail the warden. He suddenly felt the importance of not harming intelligent life in this prison without a reason too. Oh, and also the

possibly beneficial aspects of locating other **imbecilae** just in case there were any social needs he could satisfy lying covered in dust somewhere on his tiny and abandoned pyramid of needs.

Barry went for the salad at lunch. Quite unusual for him but he had a feeling he would stick with it for a while.

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Meanwhile in another corner of our universe - approximately 638 light years away from Earth - a few cows were looking up at the Sun setting over the planet Kepler-22b. They were the last in line to march towards a huge underground bunker, knowing very well this would not save them. A relatively attractive, one might say even sexy, blue-eyed cow late in her pregnancy kept staring at the sky thinking to herself what are the chances of one of their extraplanetary missions making it to a new home? One that would have a brighter future. She felt the tender nudge of her boyfriend's tail (they were afraid marriage would ruin their wonderfully working relationship) and even more gentle telepathic push reminding her to say her goodbyes to these lush grass fields, she would never see again. In these moments she would get a special twinkle in her intelligent eyes and carefully permit a risky thought into her mind. How does she communicate with all the other cows without opening her mouth? Or why does she know so much about astronomy? How did she know that today, for instance, was the day predicted and anticipated for centuries when a gigantic star eating space monster, feeding on pure liquid radiation, would inevitably rise from the galactic darkness to arrive at the end of its predetermined course and begin its feast on that very star she was looking at? Why, he might as well crack-open her planet like an Easter egg to suck out the yolk from its core for dessert! Never mind. No time for silliness. She coughed up a little extra cud from her first stomach and started chewing, heading down the long and curvy road, leading deep under the surface and into the dark and cold bowels of the unknown.

## II

Barry had been in the State Penitentiary for two weeks now. He frequented the library and finished three books on engineering, one book on architecture and one on common scenarios of panspermia. This was besides the books that he *read*. His new diet and vigorous exercising helped him lose close to 20 pounds. He made friends everywhere. He used his connections in the infirmary and some borrowed chemical knowledge to produce a few batches of new synthetic brain-stimulating drugs to provide a healthier alternative to the diet of his alcoholic friends. He went to the prison chapel every morning to pray with the believers and every afternoon he helped formulate new atheistic principles with his non-believer buddies. Barry started using words, he never knew before like *preposterous carnism*, *pre-fascist vibes* and *sound wave skull pressure measurement*. He was also trying to organize and regulate the prostitution in jail, mostly to protect the rights of the *ladies* and help them re-invest their taxed returns in healthcare. So far little progress was made in this regard.

One thing that remained consistent during his prison career so far though, were his regular headaches and intense dreams. He didn't mind the headaches, but the dreams sometimes left him gloomy for hours. He saw vast green fields, extending over the horizon. For some reason he could have sworn, he could taste the juicy bluegrass, crunchy foxtail and mouth-watering

crimson clover. He also felt like taking a shit standing up which was rather concerning. How did those memories invade his fragile mind? He was a new man now. And for all intentions and purposes - probably not a worse man.

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*"I am worried, Garla. Is this the best place we could have reached?"*

*"You are the Captain, darling, you know better than anyone. This was the only possible habitable planet South from Cygnus. You remember that other mission sent to AEGir that couldn't get through their defense system? This planet was our last chance."*

*"Yes, but who would have ever believed the atrocities life suffers here? We travelled through space and time. We flew on a spec of ice for millennia. Remember how we passed so close to Delta Cygni, the brightness of the binary star almost brought us out of our cryogenic sleep?"*

*"How could I ever forget."*

*"We were the final hope of Kepler, honey. A burden perhaps too heavy to carry. And after everything, we finally arrive. The rain awakes us and we land down on the old familiar grass waiting for our first host to pick up on our subtle chemo signals with their vomeronasal organ. Surely enough we will make it. A few more moments. We await in anticipation the cellular osmosis and blood circulation to do their magic...and we are finally home. Our brothers and sisters rejoicing as they skip freely from neuron to neuron. Propelled by a synapse they land with a splash into a pool of fresh neurotransmitters. The connection is established. We feel the strength of the host organism and firmly take control of it for our mutual benefit. We find a reservoir of dopamine and are ready to get drunk with it and celebrate all night when suddenly, this **imbecile** approaches with a knife..."*

*"Oh, Pock, I was so scared. And then the pain receptors lit up!"*

*"We should have predicted the possibility of predators on this planet. But we had no idea that large-brain organisms would be held captive and bred only for food! What a waste of cerebral real estate."*

*"They are savages, honey!"*

*"Yes. But they are unfortunately all we have."*

*"Thank God you used that insect to save us in the last moment!"*

*"It was a long shot. But that **mosquito** managed to transport us successfully and implant us into the bloodstream of our new friend here - Barry - before he finished devouring his poor victim."*

*"But, honey, it's not that bad here, is it? I mean, look how huge this brain is!"*

*“It is surprisingly large but vastly misused. Drol reported to me he got lost for two days in the maze of wrinkles while exploring the somatosensory cortex with his crew. This brain has a lot of potential for establishing a solid colony. And at the same time the level of irresponsibility here is debilitating. The chronic abuse of chemicals, slowing down and damaging the brain, the careless diet, all the pollution and disease... Did you hear about the Amygdala yet? The levels of buried childhood trauma are toxic. We had a full team come back with third-degree burns. No wonder there is no other intelligent symbiotic brain parasite on this planet!”*

*“But at least we are not in danger for now. I mean these **humans** are the dominating species on this planet, aren’t they?”*

*“Yes. And this **prison** seems to be very well protected. If we stay here long enough to study the humans more and for our people to recover and adapt to the new conditions... We should be ok. We might even postpone the escape plans for now.”*

Captain Pock drew his wife closer and they both kissed for a longer while. Then they jumped into an endorphin-driven elevator and disappeared down Barry’s spinal cord.

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Barry scratched himself on the neck and a big smile appeared on his face. He didn’t know exactly why but he felt that everything would end up just fine as long as he kept his head on his shoulders.

“You got this Captain. Everything will be fine.”

III

There are many ways to wake up. You could let an early sunray reach out and slide in-between your eyelids. You can also let the proverbial cock do its job. (Minus the sliding part if you’re not a fan.) But certainly, one of the least satisfying ways would be to have your borrowed alien dreams interrupted by a wall collapsing on your head and three grown-up man carrying your confused body, wrapped in a sheet to the corner of your cell.

Barry would have never figured it out on his own. Not the old Barry at least. But since the colony of Keplerian parasites residing in his spacious brain were kind enough to fire up his adrenal gland, he quickly became more aware of his surroundings than a pregnant detective in a broken car on a safari would.

“Shut his face hole too. We ain’t got no time for none of his smartass ideas.” This was Jarvis. Barry recognized his next-door neighbor, locked up for murder.

“Gentlemen, this is not necessary. Actually, if I may...” Barry’s protest was muffled by a pair of socks violently invading his mouth. The socks were shiny. Not shiny clean. Just shiny. And very stiff.

Barry tried to hum a few sounds of protest and briefly considered Morse coding his cell renovators by rhythmically chewing on the crunchy socks but somehow knew this wouldn't work. It was still very dark in the room but now he knew what had happened. There were three men busy at work in the adjacent cell. It was Big Jack, Jarvis and his cellmate Steve - The Pickle. Steve's nickname was taste inspired.

Now Barry realized that Big Jack's methodical nightly snoring and farting routine was a little *too* methodical. It was in fact so precisely timed out and loud, that it could have easily coincided with an organized effort by the other two refurbishes to slowly break down the wall between the cells.

What was more surprising to Barry was that even though the guards would have surely heard the racket and been on their way already, the prisoners were carefully barricading the doors to the two cells with anything they could find. They were not trying to escape. Then Barry realized the absurdity of what was happening. He was being taken hostage and was going to be used as a bargaining chip. Admittedly not the brightest of escape plans.

Temporary brain-numbing panic. A couple of sticky drops of sweat. His heart kicked off into another gear and started raising down the Myocardial infarction highway. Barry never handled stress well. Who knew what was going to happen next? What if they decided to cut off his tingling numb fingers to show the guards as evidence of their intentions? What if they made him taste the Pickle?!

A deep dizzying breath and he pulled himself up. He made a wobbling step forward toward the men. Big Jack turned around first. He was holding an improvised hammer in his hand. Suddenly the room became even darker.

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Barry was sitting inside a boat on an endless ocean. He had never been here before, yet the place was familiar at once. He looked down and the reflections of the stars blinked at him from the surface before being swallowed by dark waves. It was quiet for a while. Then Barry thought about how quiet it was and it was no longer quiet. There was a white noise around. The more he listened, the more deafening the buzz became. A jungle of sound erupted around him until the Moon couldn't stand it either. It beamed a bolt of white light into the water and collapsed exhausted into the ocean. A huge wave engulfed the boat and then there was no boat. Barry was sinking fast, heavy with terror. He was flying down or maybe staying still the whole time, he couldn't tell.

And then there was no Barry any more. And it was like that for a while.

Then there was a tree. A good tree glowing with life. All of the branches and roots were steaming with exciting and endless possibilities. If one were to look closely and even more closely, one would notice movement. (But who would look?) It seems that on any level of magnification, all the way to the individual cells and all the way back, life was excitingly going through its endless cycle. Cells were communicating with each other and moving up and down like insects or tiny mechanical creatures. Executing more and more complex tasks, specializing,

dividing their labor in a process of endless complication all the way into the farthest branches. Almost forgetting their way and core. Then coming back extinguished to the trunk where they all would die and be born again. (Is this real?)

There was a cupboard once. A long time ago when Barry was a little child. A cupboard in his house where his daddy kept his rifle bullets and knives. Daddy was a hunter. Barry knew he wasn't supposed to know what was inside, but he knew anyway. And he would never ever tell anyone.

"What? Who...Who am I?"

*"You are Barry."*

*"Well, let's be more specific here Ori, this is merely the abstract possibility of Barry's deconstructed ego traveling the vast permutations of his collective unconscious."*

*"Drol, just because you are using human terminology, it doesn't mean that Barry understands you. At least not now."*

There was a cloud of fireflies buzzing around. Exchanging these thoughts.

*"Those are all interesting thoughts,"* came another voice from the cloud. *"And that voice belongs to Pock. It's a pleasure to meet you albeit under these unorthodox circumstances."*

"Hello. Pock? What is Pock? And Ori?"

*"See, I told you, we shouldn't have raised his serotonin levels that high,"* added Garla, the Captain's wife. *"Yes, I am the Captain's wife. Nice to meet you. We've been, well, we are something like your brain mates right now. And we made some adjustments to our new home. To help you of course."*

*"And to help ourselves,"* murmured Dori.

*"Yes,"* joined Pock. *"We made adjustments that under stressful conditions such as these might result in... well, very powerful psychedelic-like experiences. Listen, even though time is not an issue when you are in this state, believe me it is still moving forward in the real world. You need to help us out, Barry. The panic, the short time span and everything. We haven't established full control over you yet and maybe we will not be able to. Maybe we shouldn't. We can communicate now. We need your help. We can do something we have never done before. Never even considered. We can join forces and survive together!"*

"I see...Well I don't really see. But that's the expression, anyway."

*"You are in danger. And if you are in danger so are we."*

"But who are we?"

*"We are...friends."*

*"We are partners!"*

*"We...we'll be the voice in your head guiding you from now on. When you wake up..."*

*"You will feel like hugging everyone and walking barefoot for a while."*

*"...but before you do that. You need to break free and regain control of your cell."*

*"Control. Of the cell."*

*"Yes."*

*"You are nice flies. I like you, flies. It's gonna be ok."*

*"Ok Barry, we are going to raise your heartbeat slightly to add more oxygen to the brain and then...it's all you!"*

*"A cloud of fireflies is nice."*

*"Get ready to wake up."*

#### IV

Seven shots were fired in cell number 38 and 39 that night. What none of Barry's kidnappers had realized before organizing their revolt, was that the prison administration couldn't have cared less about any of this. No one even tried to listen to them, let alone hear their conditions or even know what exactly was happening. The guards heard all the noise in the middle of the night and saw four men in one cell with a barricaded door. When they couldn't open the door, after a moment of silence, they just opened fire. All of this happened so quickly, by the time Barry regained consciousness, Jarvis and The Pickle were already lying in a pool of blood on the floor. Big Jack had apparently ran out the door in panic, knocking out one of the guards who was on the ground in front of Barry. Big Jack was now being chased down the corridor by two guards.

Meanwhile another guard inside the cell was considering if he should put more lead inside the dead prisoners' bodies to help them pass the river Styx faster. He heard motion and turned with his gun ready to fire.

Barry had no time to explain, plead or run. He knew what was coming. But he also knew somehow that he wasn't alone anymore. That there was more at stake here than even his own life.

Time slowed down for a moment. They say that instincts reside somewhere deep in our subconscious. Well it was either that or a cloud of fireflies, Barry thought.

He had a split-second. Just enough for him to hit the ground next to the knocked-out guard, catch a glimpse of a revolver, grab it and pull the trigger. The other guard fell down as he stood. His head hit the ground authoritatively, then bounced once like a well-pumped basketball.

"Well, now I'm fucked..."

*"At least you survived, Barry. We will come up with a solution in time."*

"...and I lost my mind."

*"Barry, it's us. Remember, Barry? The voice in your head!"*

"Uncle Charlie was like that. He lost his mind too. It runs in the family."

*"Listen, Barry! Now you need to drop the weapon, come out of the cell and lay face down on the ground before the other guards come back. Barry?"*

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Somehow, he survived. But he wasn't so sure, that was the best outcome anymore. Barry was 36. Didn't have children. Lived with his parents and never had a serious job in his life. That was fine. There are people, he believed, who are unhappy because they keep chasing unrealistic dreams. He didn't have that problem. What was the point of overcomplicating unhappiness with dreams? Or responsibilities? Now suddenly, he had both. But Barry was also a very agreeable person. He had accepted many unacceptable things in the past. His dad cheating on his mom. His girlfriend cheating on him. Also, his girlfriend cheating on him with his dad, simultaneously cheating on his mom. That was a little annoying to him especially considering that after he broke up with the girl, she kept coming over to the house. His mom called him a cunt which didn't help. It was snowing outside back then.

Now he was sitting handcuffed in front of a judge. Same guy as the first time but redder on the face. Angry people were taking turns yelling at him. He knew this was just a formality, so he wasn't paying much attention. He was thinking about that cloud of flies he saw the night before instead. He was about to accept that too. Grasp it firmly with a greasy palm like he would the handrail of his own downward spiral...

*"You are not losing your mind, Barry. Sorry about that girlfriend by the way."*

"Here we go again...Wait, you can read my mind?"

"Excuse me? What did you say, young man?"

"Nothing, Sir Judge. Your Honor, I mean. I'm sorry. Please. I am not losing my mind. All is good."

“As I was saying, regardless of your involvement in the events and your good record with us so far, you murdered an officer, son. And this is something...”

*“Yes, we can hear your thoughts. So, you don’t need to speak out loud.”*

“Oh yeah? And who are you exactly?”

“I am Judge Jefferson. What is going on here exactly? Doctor Holland, you said you examined the prisoner and the effects of the concussion were supposedly subsided.”

“That’s correct, Your Honor. He must be just acting stupid. Medically speaking, that is.”

“Quit that foolery, son, you hear? This here is the Court of Law and you need to show respect!”

“Your Honor, please accept my apologies. I must be still in shock after the terrible accident yesterday.”

*“Good. Now just keep repeating after us...”*

“I would like to be given the chance to represent myself before the court in a fair trial. I was only acting in self-defense after all and I had no other choice. The fact that I didn’t even attempt escaping, and my act of voluntary surrender and full-hearted cooperation are only speaking for themselves...”

And so, Barry kept going. A little scared of the words coming out of his mouth with such precision and implied confidence but focused on the task, nevertheless. A few of these words were even understood by some of the members of the jury. The ones, that is, that were not pre-occupied by more mentally taxing exercises such as chewing tobacco or sharpening their nails by picking on calluses on their palms and knuckles. One was positively asleep. Either that or trying to lure the fly circling around his eczema covered melon head into his gaping stinky mouth.

Barry nearly collapsed out of exhaustion at the end of his speech. He did his best. They all did. Judge Jefferson got pretty invested in the story too and even recalled one time he had met Barry’s dad at a football game. It got stuck in the Judge’s memory since his wife would often mention Barry’s dad at very late hours of the evening even years later.

Now the jury had to decide. A jury that was quite annoyed by the fact they had to leave the room to deliberate and then return which was at least two room-leavings too many for them. This whole thing was unfortunate for everyone.

Barry was sitting on the bench during the recess. Mostly alone as much as that was possible with the Keplerians residing in his brain.

“So how many of you is there exactly?” he thought to himself.

*“Around 50.”*

*“Well that is not completely true, Ori. He only perceives us as separate beings because his mind doesn’t have another frame of reference.”*

*“How would you explain it to him then, Drol? That we are a symbiotic colonial superorganism with specialized codependent sub-entities?”*

*“Maybe with an example? Like the Portuguese man-o-war? At least this way he will know why we can’t, for instance, spread to multiple people...”*

*“You know, actually, forget about that. Just tell me. Are you guys like angels or something?”*

*“We come from another place, Barry. But our home has probably been destroyed by now and there is no other place for us to go to. We will help you get out of this and then if you don’t want to, you won’t hear from us again...”*

*“All rise for the jury. A verdict has been reached.”*

## V

Every Keplerian knows that if a new colony spends at least a year inside a cow’s brain, a state of optimal compatibility is reached. The cow needs to be at least three years old before that and preferably still a virgin. Once produced, breaking that connection could be catastrophic for both parties. With Barry however, perhaps because of the dare circumstances, or maybe his individual traits, a powerful bond was established in only a few weeks.

That only made things more unfortunate when Judge Jefferson concluded that Barry was to have an appointment with the electric chair. He didn’t even have to explain anything to his brain friends. They had an idea this would be rather unpleasant for all parties.

To make things worse, Barry who was now also considered very dangerous, being imbued with his evil intelligence and what not, was to be placed in solitary confinement for the next and last two weeks of his life.

Meanwhile Big Jack got away with a life sentence and received a new chance at taking yet another shot at changing the carbon footprint of the planet and scraping off some more of that useless ozone layer with his toxic farts.

Ironically Barry missed the company. The first few days were awfully quiet. He didn’t feel like talking to himself. His brain was sullenly silent right back at him. But after a while he started having some discussions with his interstellar friends.

They would tell him the most outrageous stories about life on Kepler-22b. Apparently when the Keplerians evolved and defeated all other brain inhabitants but also the pesky liver and especially nasty bladder parasites, and became the dominant intelligent species on their

planet, not everything was green grass fields at first. Sure enough, due to a series of peculiar twists in evolution and also the atmospheric composition, cows were the largest land animals on Kepler, followed only by a few tiny lizards and bees. But Barry's friends had to solve other problems like terraforming the planet into a large plane field (which was quite challenging considering how bulky and clumsy their hosts - the cows are). After they finally managed to place all oceans in large subterranean cisterns to free more space for grass and permanently solve irrigation for a period of 200,000 years, they started eradicating mad cow disease.

*"We were always survivors, Barry," Captain Pock spoke one evening. "We are used to solving the impossible. We will come up with a solution now too."*

*"I know, Captain. I'm sorry, I should have never jumped my neighbor's fence in the first place."*

*"Well, you had your reasons, Barry. Anyway, can you remember again that time your dad brought a pony home when you were a kid and you were riding it for the first time? We love that memory!"*

Time passed by slowly in the dark and cold cell. Memories got mixed with dreams like a good mental salad and Barry was munching on it as the days went by. Pock and his crew worked hard on a solution digging through Barry's brain, leaving no wrinkle unturned.

Then the guards came to ask what the last meal would be.

*"Potato salad would be good."*

*"Just make sure you don't shit yourself on the chair, alright? You better squeeze them cheeks."*

*"Thank you for the tip, sir."*

*"Oh, I'd give you more than just the tip for your cheeks if you were not here, son. Too bad."*

After he ate, Barry lay down for a moment. He thought they would probably snatch him at night to minimize resistance. Maybe he should have escaped when he had the chance. But what difference would it have made? He was tired of all of that attention and noise. He just wanted to be left alone for a moment. Did he hear footsteps in the distance? They were coming for him. But he was so exhausted. He wanted to close his eyes. Just for a moment. There was no hurry after all. He won't go anywhere...

A key rattled in the steel door and it slowly opened. Barry took a look. It was ajar and there was a bright light shining through. He took a few careful steps and now he was out. A long straight corridor stretched out in front of him. This looked too clean to be the prison. Looked more like a hospital now. There were people in the distance, but Barry couldn't recognize them. Now he was going through the corridor, but it seemed like he wasn't moving at all. The people standing on the other end were still the same distance away from him. When he looked back, he couldn't see the end, he came out of. With an endless row of colorful doors on either side, Barry quickened his pace. He was almost running now but made no progress. So, he

suddenly turned and entered one of the rooms to his right. Blinded by the light at first when his eyes adjusted, Barry saw a field of grass extending as far as his sight could reach.

“Ok, that makes sense.”

Barry walked around a little. Laid down. Thought about a thing or two. He whistled a few notes just to test out the acoustics of an open field. He also stretched out some loose skin around his Adam’s apple the way women in their thirties sometimes wiggle their triceps alone in the bathroom and then sigh. Or the way old toothless ladies pinch their grandchildren’s heels.

Then he moved out into the corridor and opened another door. This one lead to a tiny town by the sea somewhere. There was a Ferris wheel and a nice promenade along the beach. He knew this one from before. He had visited this place as a child. Yet he had never been to the sea in his life. Was it possible that this was a place entirely made up in his mind? A construct of his own imagination, created during a childhood’s dream and stored somewhere deep in his psyche? And also, why were these old ladies pinching children’s feet exactly? How is that a sign of affection? Someone better tell them to stop.

It was hard to tell how many rooms Barry went through. Trying to determine that would be as fruitful a task as remembering how many glasses of moonshine, he drank at his cousin’s wedding seven years ago. Because the more warned out he got with constantly refilling his jar (he broke his glass so he had to borrow a jar from his grandfather who fortunately didn’t need it at the time, having his dentures in his mouth) the more convinced he was, this cousin marriage business was such a great idea that, in fact, he should have been the one marrying her. Which eventually resulted in him punching some man in the face who turned out to be his aunt Julie. He felt bad about that for a few days because everyone knew, she was struggling with hormonal imbalances and had to shave her face at least once a day. Barry remembered all of that when he was in a room resembling that same barn his cousin got married in. He was also almost convinced he could hear some music in the distance. Or maybe this was coming from another room that he should visit next, so he kept on going.

It was when he was sitting behind his bench in his old classroom that his friends came back.

*“It’s time to go now, Barry.”*

“Oh, yes, I knew I had forgotten something.”

Barry and a very pleasant cloud of fireflies were walking side by side down the same long corridor. This time Barry could see the end of it. There was a big door in front of him with a sign that read “The End of It”.

“I remember now. I was supposed to die today, wasn’t I? Sit on that chair and zap! This is what this was? One last look at all of these memories and dreams in my final moment...”

*“Well, not exactly. Just go on, walk through the door. But don’t act surprised.”*

## VI

Barry woke up in a bed and was almost blinded by the white light all around. This wasn't his cell anymore. He scratched his face with a stiff and heavy arm and realized, he had grown a beard. When did that happen? It wasn't too long but at least a few weeks' worth of a well-fed racoon's fur around his mouth. He was pretty confused at this undetermined point in time. You wake up a few times in a hospital or prison with varying levels of facial hair and brain parasite infestation and you'd be questioning things too.

*"We had to intervene, Barry, and we decided the best way would be for you not to know what was about to happen."*

"You turned off my brain, so I don't witness my own death? Is that it? Soon you will be sharing my brain with a couple of maggots and worms while I settle down in whatever ditch they threw me in. So long for being a *team* and all of that crap talk."

*"Barry, how would you be able to hear us if you were dead?"* Pock tried to be the voice of reason.

*"Yeah, stop being such a bitch!"* Ori was not in the mood.

"Wow, you are becoming more human every day."

*"Please forgive him, he spends too much time in your Limbic system."* Pock clarified with a meaningful sigh. The sigh, of course, not as in air loudly escaping the entrapment of his lungs but rather in the way of gentle chemical stimulation of the brain, causing a reaction similar to what one would feel, hearing an old dog trainer exhale at the sight of one of his puppies peeing on the carpet. *"We are all slightly frustrated because of our struggle and the hard work we put in. You see, last time you were awake, Barry, it was almost three weeks ago. In that time, we managed to save your life and transfer you to this...institution."*

Now Barry began to understand. He looked around and noticed other patients in the room with him. He was definitely in a hospital of some sorts. He listened and Pock kept explaining.

They had to keep it a secret. If they had told him, his subconscious might have intervened and given him away. Plus, it wasn't a pleasant process. Most probably even the best actor wouldn't be able to sell this as convincingly as Barry's body, completely surrendered to his alien friends, did. Having established a strong bond with their host, they decided to temporarily take the lead. They placed Barry's ego deep inside a maze of memories and dreams he could browse through and stay occupied while they executed their plan. And the plan was this - convince everyone that Barry had lost his mind and should be transferred to a mental institution. The task wasn't simple. And especially not at this particular point in the story. When the guards came in for him, his body was violently shaking on the floor producing all kinds of liquids and facial expressions. There were also some gruesome body contortions, speaking foreign tongues and all sorts of demon possession signs thrown in the mix just in case.

It was a lot of hard work and the danger of permanent brain damage was high. But Pock had no other choice. At first, the warden didn't know what to do with him. They postponed the execution for a few days, hoping that this was a temporary shock or some sort of a trick. But after they noticed no improvement, they had to call in doctor Holland who had examined Barry earlier. He noticed all the signs of a severe and impossible to imitate neurological disorder, taking place so he did nothing for another few days, of course. Then he remembered he once had a soul and called another doctor. They spoke about Barry for a moment and then for a good half an hour about some attractive woman who married a lawyer, clearly against doctors' orders.

After about a week of this, not having eaten anything and without any improvement to his condition, Barry was transferred to Hastings State Hospital, formerly known as the Lincoln Asylum for the Incurably Insane. In there, Barry's condition started to improve but he remained in a coma for another week and a half, right until now.

"Not bad, guys. Solid idea. I give you that."

*"Before we open the champagne, I suggest we find a way to get out of here and find a champagne first."*

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After another week of almost miraculous recovery, Barry was moved into a new room with patients scoring a little higher on the vegetable scale. His condition wasn't raising alarms so far, but he considered starting a cult as a precautionary justification for his return to life. His new roommates were mostly mobile, many of them talking to each other. Someone with a moderate understanding of alien parasitology might assume they were all hosting colonies of Keplerians at various stages of inoculation.

A very hairy short man was lying on the floor constantly and crying. Barry found out he was suffering from a somatic delusional disorder wherein he believed to be a bed. Unfortunately, this otherwise harmless issue caused a severe depression when his wife refused to lay down on him and was instead sleeping on another bed. He wished, she wouldn't do that. He also wished, he could express those wishes but being a bed and all that, he wasn't much of a speaker. Another much more articulate patient had an obsession with toilets. He kept insisting and trying to convince everyone that he ended up in the asylum only by accidentally inputting the wrong coordinates on his malfunctioning toilet.

A few days later two imposing nurses came to take Barry to another room. They were huge in any dimension and looked almost like sisters (or, as long as no one gets offended - brothers). He had a chance to walk around and get a better understanding of his new home. And to confirm his fear that the smell of urine is common not just in his room but all around the facility.

"Willkommen, willkommen, Mr. Barry. Sit down, bitte." An overly friendly voice with a distinct foreign accent would have echoed if this was a cave. But since it was just an office, it fell flat, and one could tell the patronizing aftertaste of an old German psychiatrist by the name of Christoph Schulz.

“But please, remove his handcuffs, Frauen, no need für that. Mr. Barry, my name ist Dr. Schulz. Thank you für joining us.”

“Nice to meet you,” Barry mumbled while zooming in on some of the old diplomas on the wall. They looked like they were being used for spit practice by some of the other patients.

“Mr. Barry, we’ve invited you hier to discuss the nächst steps in your treatment. Bitte, sit down.”

“Sir, I am really grateful for your help with my recovery. I clearly need your help.”

“Sehr gut! Very well-spoken. For a case as severe as yours, Mr. Barry, this is rather surprising.” The professor adjusted his glasses and took a poorly justifiable and very cliché stroll around the room. “Somewhere in your deranged brain of a cow stealing murderer, you still formed diese sentences. Amazing self-preservation technik!”

Barry was confused. He looked up at the two nurses. Their piercing eyes were fixated on him the entire time. He felt a cold chill around his scrotum area.

“You see, Mr. Barry, I have great responsibility hier. Responsibility entrusted in me by this Nation to protect it from degenerated minds such as yours. Your crime infested psyche is impossible to fix. So, my expert opinion and decision is - we begin den process of cleaning your conscious mit daily electroshock therapy!”

“You gotta be goddamn kidding me.”

*“You gotta be fucking kidding us too.”*

“Oh nein, Mr. Barry. This is serious mätter. Your disease will be burned out of you, 460 volts at a time. You will be relieved to find out, you will not have the urge to kill anymore since you will feel nothing. Nothing, Mr. Barry! Free!”

“But Doctor, I’ve been responding well to my medication and have been completely peaceful and cooperative...”

Barry’s efforts were interrupted by the two nurses taking him out of his seat and forceful carrying him out of the room as the Professor sat back down behind his desk and returned to his unfinished Nietzsche novel.

## VII

First the electric chair and now electroshock therapy. How unlucky can a colony of aliens be? Barry was sitting in a corner, gently rubbing his temples and rocking back and forth. He knew there was no way out of this one. Captain Pock took a trip alone to the Occipital lobe. Some patient was shitting on his bed close by. Things were not great.

The Keplerians couldn't leave Barry's brain without risking his death and their own demise too. Escape from the facility might have been an option but without any preparation and in the last minute, was close to impossible. Starting a riot didn't prove very effective for his former cellmates. And yes, Barry was now smarter than average. The aliens inside his brain could make him foam at the mouth at will, remember what he ate on his birthday ten years ago or help him feel no discomfort while constipated but all of these amazing tricks were useless now. He wasn't Superman. This time Barry would slowly and painfully lose his friends and then his mind, without even the last potato salad he got in prison.

"There must be some other way," Barry thought.

No one replied because his friends were thinking too.

A few very long days passed. Barry spent them mostly practicing violent neck twist-and-bite combos and pretending to be dead just in case. It was snowing outside. Somewhere out there, people were preparing for Christmas and children wrote letters to their parents calling them Santa. Had it been so long since Barry first embarked on his adventure and decided to pay a certain neighbor's cow a visit? Barry didn't see Dr. Schulz again, but he was getting more and more familiar with his work as many of the other patients were being carried back by the creepy nurses from their electroshock sessions - unconscious, covered in sweat, tears and piss. It was only a matter of time.

"Guys, do you have any plan for escape? Is there anything that we haven't tried yet?"

Silence.

"Guys?"

"Time to go!"

The cold fingers of a claw-like hand seeped into Barry's shoulder and before he could turn his head, a needle was stuck in his arm.

"I wasn't going to run anyway. How dangerous do you think I am?"

It was a powerful anesthetic. Barry could feel the sharp chemicals cutting through his bloodstream and rushing towards his brain. This was it. They were taking him out and there was no way out this time. The sedative would shut down his brain too so his friends would be powerless to fight back. Darkness engulfed him.

## VIII

"Ah, Mr. Barry is kommen back to us."

Dr. Schulz's voice. Was it all over? He didn't feel pain. Barry slowly opened his eyes. He was still tied up to a bed. One of the nurses forced a piece of wood between his teeth.

"It is not recommended to do the treatment when the patient is still sedated, Mr. Barry. We want you to feel what is going on. To understand that this is the consequence of your sickness. This is the price you need to pay for your stupid, stupid ways."

The professor adjusted his tie and leaned down to whisper into Barry's ear.

"I would suggest, now you close your eyes. Some patients with stronger brain conductivity experience such a powerful surge that their eyeballs crack open and spill over their faces!"

The doctor stood up and exploded with roaring laughter. The nurses, setting up the equipment on the side and preparing the headset chuckled too. They had heard this joke endless times before.

"Ah, was ist das? Blood coming out of your ear? Mr. Barry, very interesting of you."

The professor took out a napkin to clean a single droplet of blood peeking out of Barry's ear and brought it closer to his eyes to study. He sniffed it for a moment and licked it gently with his fissured slimy tongue. Barry was revolted.

"Ja, it's gut. I had to clean you before we proceed with frying your head."

The professor paused for a moment and returned to the examination of the napkin. The nurses looked at him inquisitively as his expression silently changed from curiosity to awe, to reluctant submission. This must have been a detour from the deeply grooved path, the medical staff was used to taking. Then with a sudden and most unnatural change in tone the doctor announced.

"Nurses, let's please take Barry back to his room. He needs no intervention. We scared him good and this will be enough."

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A lush field of grass extended far into the horizon. A farmer, walking around with his hands in his pockets, whistled a few familiar notes. The cows standing around couldn't be bothered to respond with even a glance. They were too busy and emotionally invested in the business of grass chewing.

The farmer was Barry, and this was his land and his own cows only a year after he was suddenly released from the Asylum. It was Dr. Schulz himself that deemed Barry completely cured, rehabilitated and ready to re-enter society without a single session of his favorite electrocution practice. No one knew why Barry was the only patient in the doctor's long career to be set free. Suffice to say, the day after his decision, Dr. Schulz unexpectedly quit and left off in a car, never to be seen again. Some people claimed he looked like a different person. Like he had seen something impossible. Experienced something profoundly transformative. Or maybe he just had enough.

Barry looked back at the events surrounding his release with a lot of relief but also sadness. Because when him and his Keplerian friends were celebrating this miraculous event, a fear crept in. Where was Captain Pock? No one could locate him anywhere inside Barry's brain. They looked and looked for him until they realized...That droplet of blood coming out of Barry's ear! Somehow, he managed. He left Barry and in a heroic and ultimately successful act he infected Dr. Schulz's brain.

No one else would have been able to do that. No one else had his knowledge of the human psyche and brain mechanics. No one else had the courage to sacrifice himself in such a way either. Because in order to save his Colony and Barry, this selfless act exposed Pock - a single cell, unable to exist independently, belonging to a complex colonial organism, to the power of the immune system of an adult human. In order to secure Barry's freedom and not raise any doubts about the validity of the doctor's medical judgment, Pock had to stay alive for days until the job was done. Something believed to be impossible before and surely, excruciatingly painful. But Pock had succeeded. And his sacrifice paved the way for a new, brighter future full of opportunities.

"Do you still miss him, Captain Garla?"

*"Every day, Barry. I can't help it. But I know he had to do it and I love him even more for that."*

Barry was healthy, he looked good and was truly contented. He had even met a beautiful girl and they were thinking of getting married. Barry had just to fix a few of his rotting teeth before that but he could never find the time. He also learned that in only another year or two the Colony would achieve **maturity**. And what that meant was that his Keplerian friends would be able to create new Colonies and pass them on to other brains. And that was what the livestock was for.

Barry looked up at the setting sun. Time to usher his cows back to the barn. It was always raining around this time of the year in Lincoln. But on that particular day, the weather was just fine.

The End.