

SPACER'S DIGEST

by Atk. Butterfly

I was going through the stack of magazines at the dentist's office. It wasn't exactly what I preferred to be doing. Being at his office, that is. Browsing through magazines is another matter. I do that at the barber shop, too. At least, it's a way to spend a few minutes that would otherwise be wasted.

Getting back to the point, I was going through the magazines. That's when I came across an unusual tome. It was called *Spacer's Digest*. At first, I thought it was some other publication if only because it was the same size and format, though it wasn't printed on paper. It was on something else of a very glossy nature, but I don't know what exactly. However, the table of contents was on the front cover. On the back was a nature scene. Well, I suppose it was a nature scene. At first, I thought it was just a photo that was put through some filters to get a strange effect. I'm not so sure of that anymore. To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure of too much of anything anymore.

All right, maybe you're not getting the whole idea here. The articles listed on the cover seemed normal, except they seemed to be dealing with space and various worlds. The articles were quite varied. I remember there was "Asteroid Collision: Alone and Adrift in Space," "Preparing Worlds for Galactic Membership: The Need for Technological Skills," "Humor in the Cosmos," "Converting Primitive Worlds To Universal Language Before Official Contact: Who Cares What Primitives Call It Until Then?," and "Dental Missionary To Earth: A Primitive Multi-cultural World" to name a few. For a moment, I looked at that magazine as if it were a parody. You've probably seen them before. I know I have, except they seem to be more blatantly hilarious in the way they emulate the original publication.

What happened from there is that I flipped through to one of the articles, expecting to be entertained by a spoof of a real-life rescue. Instead, there was nothing funny about it. It was a serious straightforward article about someone who was adrift in space for quite a while before being rescued. To be blunt, I read it with interest even though I thought it was going to be funny. When I went to another article, it was the same way. It wasn't humor at all. It was telling about the subject in realistic tones. By the time I finished that article, I was stunned somewhat.

After that, rather than refer to the table of contents, I began looking at the magazine from the first page to the last, just glancing at every page for a few moments, trying to find out whether the book was a parody or not. I spotted a few more articles that looked interesting. As soon as I got to the last page, I went back to one particular article mentioning Earth and began reading it.

I didn't get to finish it before a nurse using broken English called me from the counter to enter the treatment room where my teeth would be worked on. The whole while that I sat in the dentist's chair, my mind was on that magazine. I didn't even realize when the dentist finished up on me. In fact, I couldn't even remember feeling any pain during the whole session, not that I ever remember having any while in his care. When the paper dribble napkin was removed from under my chin so I could get up and leave, I went straight back to the waiting room for the magazine, instead of heading directly for the exit as most normal people would do under ordinary circumstances. After all, no one, including me, wants to remain in a dentist's office longer than necessary. However, that one time for me was an exception.

Thankfully, the magazine was still there. I grabbed it before any other patient could get to it. Then I sat back down and finished the article. When I finished it, I was more stunned than before.

Why?

Well, the answer is quite simple. For one thing, it was written and submitted to the magazine by the dentist who had seen me. He was describing his work as a missionary on Earth to help primitive people. Us, primitive? Yeah, that's what I thought at that moment.

No kidding! That's what the article was primarily about. The only thing that made it all the more real was that my dentist had not only described his work, but several of the cultures found on Earth. He even had photos of them with his article. I think that was what convinced me the most. Yeah, I found myself in one of the photos where I was getting my teeth fixed with some strange instrument that I don't know a name for. Except for that one instrument, it was a fairly ordinary appearing dental operating room, complete with the usual reclining chair and trays. Judging from what could be seen through the window of the room in that photo, it was some months earlier. I more or less remembered that session.

However, that photo wasn't the one that convinced me at all. It was another one where he described some of the cultures found on Earth which he visited during his off time. If I and my family hadn't been in another photo ... well, I probably would have thought it was some sort of joke magazine the dentist had put together for his patients to find and enjoy. However, seeing my family and myself pictured while we were at a nudist resort and being described as a back-to-nature cult was something else entirely. I mean, that's the kind of photo just about no magazine carries, especially without a public release. I knew I hadn't signed such a release for any such photos.

I was fuming mad by then. By that time it didn't matter to me what the magazine was supposed to be. I felt that the dentist didn't have the right to show me and my three daughters and son while we were standing around naked just before jumping into a pool to race each other. That's right, it was a full frontal shot of us all. I wasn't embarrassed by that. Instead, I was thinking of all the perverts who might see my daughters and try to meet them for the purpose of harming them. I mean, my teenage daughters didn't lack anything in their physical maturity. I could just imagine them being stalked right that moment by someone else with a copy of that magazine. I was about ready to stalk back into the back office where my dentist was to give him a piece of my mind. Probably, I would have given him more than a piece of my mind. Most likely, I would have also given him a fist or two.

However, before I got up from where I was sitting, my eyes somehow caught sight of my dentist on the same photo page. Of course he was nude, except well, he wasn't exactly a he in the photo. It took me a moment to realize that he was a very flat-chested and ugly woman.

Okay, I'm letting my emotions color my feelings about him or her. I guess he or she wasn't that ugly. Then again, he was flat-chested and he was a female in appearance despite having a masculine name. So, I puzzled over that fact for a moment, losing my incentive to rush back in to confront him or her. I was confused enough that I just sat there. That's right, I just sat there in stunned silence.

What happened after that is that I continued to sit in that waiting room while I read the rest of the *Spacer's Digest*. I even read the ads, which turned out to be for products I'd never heard of. Of course, they were made by companies I also hadn't ever heard of. I just sat there and read until the office hours ended and the dentist came out as he or she put on a coat to leave. That's when we talked after I stood up to confront him.

"Doctor, I'd like to talk with you for a moment. I think it's important," I said with as much indignity and menace as I could muster.

The doctor noticed the *Spacer's Digest* in my hands. His or her face went slightly pale. The doctor stated, "I see you have my magazine. You read it, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. Would you care to explain some of this to me, please? "

He was clearly disappointed by my answer. It was lucky for him that his face clearly showed pain or agony right then. I wasn't sure which, but it mattered. Otherwise, I probably would have belted him had he shown any other emotion.

Then he said, "I'm sorry. That wasn't supposed to be among the patients' reading material. I suppose you read my article?"

"Yes, every word. I looked carefully at the photos, too," I answered in a softer tone though I'm certain that my face was still livid with anger. "I'm just a little bit upset with you for publishing a nude photo of my children. If any harm comes to them as a result of this, I hope you realize that I'll take you to court at the very least."

"I'm sorry about that, but I'm sure no harm will come to them. No one will want to travel here to molest your son or your daughters, for that matter," the doctor answered.

"Travel here? From where? Are you telling me that this magazine is all real? These are all true articles?" I asked.

The doctor replied confidently, "Of course, it all is. How else do you think I could keep my billing down? I'm really a sponsored missionary dentist."

"But it's in English!"

"Of course it is. Our issues are prepared in native languages and form as part of our sponsor's efforts to assist us in blending in. Probably one of the technicians carried it out here by accident and forgot to take it back to the office. They're only supposed to read it to improve their English mastery."

I looked at him or her for a moment as I tried to comprehend what I was being told. After all, I was used to meeting hard-working people who were recent immigrants. Somehow, I'd taken his staff for just such people without realizing just how far they'd really traveled. It was more than I expected to learn. If what I was being told were true, then I guess it also explained why a root canal was so inexpensive, costing me only a hundred bucks. I thought before that moment that I'd merely been lucky in finding a dentist who was dedicated more to healing than to chasing a buck. However, I still didn't believe him or her entirely at that moment.

The doctor asked softly, "May I have my magazine back, please?"

I replied, "No. I don't like the way you treated us in here. Calling us primitive people is one thing. You show you're certainly not so advanced yourself when you don't bother with obtaining releases before you use photos of us after invading our privacy. That is a private club, you should realize."

The doctor stammered briefly, "But sir, that was a professional paper. Researchers don't go around asking primitive people for their permission to use their likeness."

"This doesn't look like a professional journal," I stated.

"Sir, the article was first published in a professional journal. The Digest obtained permission to reprint it," the doctor said, slowly regaining his confidence.

"This is in another magazine? How many people are seeing these photos of us?" I asked.

"On Earth? Human people like yourself? Probably only you. I told you, this was left by accident where you found it. I never intended for anyone on Earth to read it other than myself and my staff," the doctor answered.

I said defiantly, "Then if it's the only copy here, I'm keeping it just to make sure that it doesn't get circulated. I want to be sure my children are safe from people seeing them whom I don't know from Adam ... or Eve, whatever the case is. Good day to you, doctor."

It was then that I left his or her office with the magazine in my hand. It was no use for us to discuss the issue any further. I was almost to the boiling point again where I would have punched him or her in the mouth. When I reached home, the magazine went directly into the fireplace.

* * *

"Well, that was a year ago. I went back for my annual checkup, a bit disgusted because I wasn't called the day before for a verification of my appointment as I usually was by the dentist's office. When I got there, it was closed tighter than a tube of glue with a leaky cap. I walked around the office building for a few moments, discovering that it appeared to have been shut down for months. I guess that was when I wondered if the dentist had been telling the whole truth. Most of it seemed preposterous to me then. After all, I was more concerned about that photo of my kids in it. Then I had to find another dentist when one tooth began to hurt not long after that. The referral service recommended you as being one of the best. Anyway, that's why I don't

have any dental records to have transferred to you," I said.

"That's interesting. Now, open wide while I give you a shot to deaden the pain," the dentist said.

"A shot? For pain? My previous dentist didn't have to do that. Are you sure that's necessary?" I asked.

The dentist said, "Well ... yes, it is. After all, I'm going to have to drill to get that root cleaned out of nerve tissue and rejoin where it broke below the gumline."

"Drill? Isn't that a bit primitive?" I asked apprehensively.

He said, "Just a bit wider, please ..." *

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