

BARBARY



VONDA N. Mc INTYRE

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Vonda N. McIntyre



Book View Café edition

September 2011

ISBN: 978161138 082 8

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Chapter One

High in the corners of the spaceport waiting room, four small TV screens displayed a space shuttle, piggybacked on external fuel tanks, shedding clouds of vapor down its flanks.

Barbary watched the shuttle intently. Other times she might have wished to see it real, instead of filtered through lenses and electronics. Other times, but not now.

She brushed her fingertips across the front of her baggy jacket, checking for her ticket in one of its many outside pockets. She had buttoned the ticket safely in; she knew she had not lost it. During her first hours in the waiting room, two weeks ago, she had made touching the ticket a habit. The habit no longer reassured her, though, for she had been bumped off two flights and the ticket had been revalidated twice. Now, as launch approached, she felt the awful certainty that once more she would not get on board.

She fumbled in another pocket of the jacket, pulled out her old silver dollar, and passed it across the knuckles of her right hand. She flipped it over and over with her fingers, caught it with her thumb, brought it

under her palm and back up onto her knuckles, then started over again. The trick was a good one to do when she felt nervous, because it took a lot of concentration.

The antique coin slipped from her fingers and bounced on the carpet. She scooped it up, clutched it, and shoved it deep into her pocket. The worn edges dug into her palm. She was not very good at sleight of hand. She had only begun to learn it, or any other sort of stage magic, three months before. Doing it well took years of practice.

She knew it took years; she knew she was not very good. She just hoped she was good enough.

She touched her ticket once more, feeling the hard edge of plastic beneath the rough material of the army surplus jacket. She forced herself to keep her hand away from the single pocket inside her jacket, the secret pocket, to think about anything except the weight pressing against her side. It was important to pretend the secret pocket carried nothing, important to believe the secret pocket did not even exist. If she believed nothing was there, no one else would suspect. But if anyone found out, she would never ride the shuttle even if a place opened up for her.

So far, fifty-four passengers had boarded. Barbary had been here since before they began loading and she had counted every one of them. She knew they were all important, and she recognized many of them from the news. No one would say whether they were going to

the low-earth-orbit space station, or farther out to the O'Neill colonies, where human beings lived permanently, or even all the way to the research station, *Einstein*, where Barbary was supposed to be going. No one would even say why they were leaving Earth. No one had to say that whatever they were doing and wherever they were going, they were much more important than one twelve-year-old emigrant.

Still, only fifty-four had boarded, and the ship, in this configuration, could carry sixty. She might finally have a chance for a place. She wished she knew. Her social worker, Mr. Smith, had gone to check the reservations again.

Barbary slumped back in the uncomfortable waiting room seat. Her feet did not reach the floor, and the arms of the chair rose too high for her to sit cross-legged.

The door opened. Barbary glanced around, expecting Mr. Smith. Instead, a frail and elderly Native American entered, accompanied by one of the port attendants. By now Barbary knew most of the attendants by name. This one was Jack. He treated the new passenger with great deference. Though she spoke too softly for Barbary to make out her words, Barbary could feel her presence, her aura of calm and quiet power.

Barbary suddenly realized why she looked familiar. Like so many of the passengers who had already boarded, she, too, frequently appeared on the news.

Ambassador Begay represented the United Tribes of North America at the United Nations. A year before, she had been elected United Nations secretary-general.

She preceded Jack into the loading tunnel and disappeared.

Though all the space colonies sent ambassadors to the United Nations, Barbary had never heard of a secretary general visiting a colony before, or even going into space. Barbary read news about the colonies and the research station whenever she could find it. She was sure she would have remembered if they had received a United Nations mission. Even if they had, this trip should have gotten some attention. Particularly during the last month, Barbary had had very little to do but watch TV, and read, and wait, either at the juvenile home or here at the spaceport. The secretary-general's trip had gone unreported. With Ambassador Begay and all the other famous people on board the shuttle, reporters and cameras ought to be swarming all over the place. Instead, the port was practically deserted.

Something secret, something unusual, was going on, something to do with the space colonies.

Barbary wondered angrily what the big mystery was. Any other time she would have been fascinated and curious, but right now what mattered was that she would probably be bumped off this flight, too. If she did not take today's shuttle, the space transport would boost from low earth orbit to the research station,

Einstein, without her. *Einstein* traveled in a highly elliptical polar orbit that took it far from earth, even farther than the moon. For three-quarters of its orbit, it lay out of range of any spacecraft. If she did not catch this evening's transport, she would have to wait over a month for the next trip. And a month from now would be too late.

Her fear made her angry and defensive. This was a matter of life and death.

She forced herself not to reach into the secret pocket to be sure everything was all right.

It isn't there, she thought. Don't touch it. Nothing's in it. It isn't even there.

And so what if I don't get on board this time, or ever? she thought, trying to persuade herself not to care. It probably won't make any difference at all. Even if I get to go to space, everything will probably be just the same.

Jack came out of the loading tunnel and strode across the waiting room, ignoring Barbary.

"When do I get to go on board?" she asked. In the silence of the small room, her voice sounded loud and sullen.

I don't care if I get to go or not, she thought. I really don't care.

She tried to make herself believe it.

Jack stopped and turned unwillingly toward her, tired of answering her questions.

"Look, I just don't know, all right?" He made

himself grin. "Why don't you go get yourself a nice glass of juice?"

Though her stomach had been growling for the past hour, Barbary shook her head. That was a clincher. The instructions for riding the shuttle recommended eating a light breakfast, and nothing afterward. If Jack thought Barbary had a chance to get on board today, he would not tell her to drink anything. She wished he would just say so and be done with it, instead of patronizing her with fake smiles.

Turning away from him, trying to hold back tears, she glared at the closed-circuit TV. Watching it was like being in a dream where she could see herself from a distance, for the waiting room in which she sat was quite visible as a low concrete building near the launch tower. Nothing moved in the picture except the long wisps of vapor.

When Jack returned, he accompanied three people in business suits. One carried a briefcase. He was middle-aged, and though Barbary could not immediately place him, he looked as familiar as the secretary-general. The other two were much younger, and they were obviously his bodyguards. Both wore half-tinted glasses, the kind that would darken in sunlight. One wore an earring — an earphone, like a TV reporter's — and the other wore a wide, thin bracelet, a nanocomputer, the smallest Barbary had ever seen.

None of them spoke. The first bodyguard went

ahead into the tunnel. Jack stood aside for the others to precede him, but the second bodyguard motioned him on with a quick jerk of his head, waited for Jack and the older man to pass, then brought up the rear. Barbary watched the silent ballet. Under other circumstances she might have laughed. But nothing felt very funny right now. Jack returned, looking grim.

"Who were they?" Barbary said.

"Never mind."

"You might as well tell me, I'm going to remember for myself in a minute. The old guy, anyway."

Jack shrugged. "You'll have to, then, because I can't tell you. You probably shouldn't even be here to see him."

"I have a right to be here! I have a ticket. I have a reservation. Just like I did twice before!"

"Look, there isn't anything I can do."

Barbary remembered. "The guy who wasn't wired up was the vice president," she said. "That's right, isn't it? Those bodyguards are coming back out, aren't they?"

"No."

"You mean he's taking them to the research station? Why? What for?"

"Rules. Federal law, for all I know."

"He's taking up two extra seats," Barbary said, then stopped her pointless protest. Jack knew as well as she did — as well as anybody who knew anything did — how useless bodyguards would be in space. No one

owned weapons; everyone in the small population knew everyone else. The crime rate was so low that there practically was no crime rate. Barbary supposed that people sometimes got mad enough to want to punch each other out, and maybe even did it once in a while, but the deliberate, vicious sort of violence that made bodyguards necessary on earth simply never happened.

"Bodyguards," Barbary said with disgust.

Jack shrugged. No doubt he had to face stupid rules even more often than Barbary did. They were not his fault. That was the trouble. They were never anybody's fault. Therefore no one could ever be found who had the authority to bend or break or stretch them.

"Nothing I can do," Jack said, and left the waiting room.

Barbary rose and walked to the tunnel, lugging her duffel bag. She hesitated at the entrance, then plunged inside. The weight of the secret pocket bumped gently against her side. She kept herself from looking down to see if the lump showed. She knew it did not. Even if it did, it was too late now.

She got as far as the elevator. She had hoped that the one attendant took passengers all the way to their seats, and that she could get on board in between Jack's trips. Trying to stow away on a spaceship would be dumb, apart from being dangerous and probably impossible, but Barbary had a ticket for her seat and she hoped that maybe, just maybe, if she got inside,

they would let her stay rather than making all the fuss of putting her off.

But another spaceport employee waited at the elevator. Barbary pulled out her ticket and offered it up. The agent took it, slid it through the sensor, and nodded at the readout.

"Your ticket's all right," she said, "but where's Jack?"

"He said to go on," Barbary said.

"He's supposed to bring you himself."

Barbary shrugged as pleasantly as she could. Since she had no idea what emergency might call Jack away, it made a lot more sense for her not to try to make one up. "He said just come on."

The agent touched a key on the sensor and glanced at the read-out again. "There are still three people ahead of you on the reservation list, and only two seats. There isn't any change there."

Barbary held herself back from snapping "I've been bumped twice already," and said instead, "He said to get on board."

She heard footsteps behind her. She had lost her gamble.

The footsteps stopped. Jack cleared his throat. With her shoulders slumped, Barbary turned around.

The passenger accompanying Jack would take up the next to last seat. Barbary glared at her, but her anger changed to astonishment when she recognized the astronaut Jeanne Velory. The tall woman carried a

scuffed briefcase and a small backpack. Her short curly hair was so dark it sparkled, and her eyes were deep green, the color of a pine forest. She was even more striking than photographs and news tapes hinted. She gazed down quizzically.

Jack frowned. "Go back to the waiting room and sit down," he said with some asperity. "Or go home and wait for the next liftoff."

Humiliated and furious, fighting tears again, Barbary pushed past him. She refused to cry, and she refused to leave. In the waiting room she flung herself into a chair and tried to think.

"Barbary."

She started. She had not heard Mr. Smith come back in. The social worker stood over her, looking down with his perpetually sad expression. He never acted happy or excited about anything. Only sad.

"We might as well go. I'm afraid you're not going to get on this flight, either."

"There's one more seat."

"I know. But it's reserved. In fact it's reserved for two different people, and they don't know what to do about that."

"Kick both the others off and give me the place. It's mine! It isn't fair!"

"Perhaps not," he said. "But there's a meeting at the station. They have to transport the participants."

"And they figure somebody who's only twelve years old doesn't have anything better to do, anyway, except

sit here waiting.”

He blinked his sad brown eyes. “If you want to look at it that way, I’m afraid that’s quite true. But I’d advise you to accept the delay gracefully. You’ve caused us all considerable worry, with your stubbornness and your running away.”

“I didn’t run away!” Barbary said. “I had to find a new home for Mickey!” If he stopped believing what she had told him, everything was ruined.

“You risked your emigrant status. You should have sent that cat to the pound.”

“You...”

She stopped herself in time. She wanted to swear at him, to scream and curse. She could do it, too. She knew words he had probably never heard of, and she knew how to use them. Up to a couple of months ago, she would have. But Barbary had recently noticed that civilized people did not swear, and that they looked down on people who did. If she wanted to live on the research station, if she wanted her new family to let her stay and to have some regard for her, she had to learn to behave like a civilized person.

Instead of cussing Mr. Smith out, she glared at him and turned her back.

“I know you’re eager to get to your new home,” Mr. Smith said. “But you ought to look on the delay as an opportunity. You might not be back on earth for years. You have a chance to look at things for the last time, and see things you’ve never seen before...”

"There's nothing I want to see again and nothing I want to see for the first time, not here. I want to leave and I don't care if I never come back!"

He hesitated, as if shocked by her determination. "Well," he said, "all right. But you aren't going to be able to leave today. Let's go home." He took her wrist.

Barbary twisted her hand from his grasp. "I'm staying right here till they let me on or lift off without me. And if they go without me I may stay here anyhow!"

On the IV screen, the shuttle prepared to launch. It had to take off within a specific period of time, during the launch window. When those few minutes had passed and the shuttle lifted off, Barbary's last chance would vanish in the trail of the rockets.

Jack came out of the tunnel. He walked through the waiting room quickly, without looking at Barbary.

"There's one seat left," she said as he reached the door.

He stood very still with his shoulders hunched and stiff. After a moment he faced her

"Now, see here —!" He cut off the words and began again, though he still sounded angry. "You aren't going to get on this flight."

"Kick off those bodyguards. Then there'll be room for everybody."

"I can't do that."

"The ship can't wait much longer," Barbary said with desperation. "We're already into the launch

window. Let me get on. Tell the pilot to take off and tell the people who're coming that they're too late. Everybody knows you can't delay a shuttle like any old airplane. Then you won't have to try to figure out which one of them to give the seat to."

Jack not only looked tempted, he looked as if he were about to grin. But he shook his head. "I don't have the authority."

"Then who does?" Barbary cried.

He left the room, not even looking back.

"Barbary, please sit down," Mr. Smith said. "Relax. I can't understand why you're so upset. Be reasonable. It isn't going to hurt you to wait for the next shuttle."

"Yes it is! I have to —!" She stopped, afraid she had already said too much, afraid she had aroused his suspicions. She was on her feet, clutching her silver coin till its smooth worn edge cut into her palm. She did not even remember standing up. Holding back tears of rage and frustration, she obeyed Mr. Smith's request. She did not know what she was going to do if she had to wait for another liftoff. She feared she would have to choose between abandoning her chance to emigrate and breaking a promise that meant as much to her as her dreams.

Author's Note

I'm grateful to [Dr. John G. Cramer](#) of the University of Washington in Seattle and "[The Alternate View](#)" columnist for *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*. He offered expert advice that helped immeasurably in the creation of the research station *Einstein* and, particularly, in the descriptions of what it would feel like to live and work in an environment in which gravity is provided by radial acceleration.

I'm also indebted to the late Gerard K. O'Neill and the [Space Studies Institute](#). The society to which Barbary emigrates grew out of Dr. O'Neill's proposals for permanent inhabited orbiting colonies, the mass driver, and other practical ideas for allowing human beings to live in space.

– VNM

Author's Note, 2011

I wrote *Barbary* in 1986, when security at airports was less stringent than it is today. Will security at spaceports be equally stringent? I hope that won't be necessary.

I considered revising the text, but once a writer begins revising a published book, there's probably no stopping.

The book does include one correction from the first edition, replacing a change I originally made under protest. My editor was under the impression that nobody under 21 knows or ever uses any profanity. This isn't true now and it wasn't true then, so I changed it back.

– VNM

Author's Note, 2012

Dr. John G. Cramer kindly gave me permission to reprint his Alternate View column, "Artificial Gravity: Which Way Is Up?" in the ebook edition of *Barbary*.

— VNM

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Book View Café

September 2011

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ISBN: 978161138 082 8

First Published by Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986

Cover Design by Amy Sterling Casil

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Book View Café edition

September 2011

ISBN: 978161138 082 8

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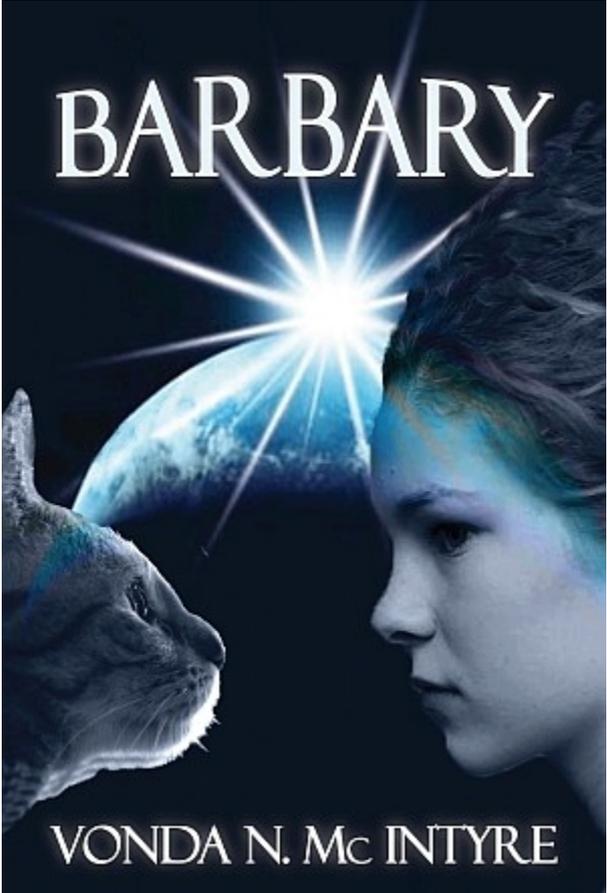
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BARBARY

The book cover for 'Barbary' by Vonda N. McIntyre features a central image of a woman and a cat in profile, facing each other. The woman is on the right, and the cat is on the left. They are set against a dark background with a bright, glowing blue sun or starburst in the upper center, and a blue planet or moon visible behind it. The title 'BARBARY' is written in a white, serif font at the top, and the author's name 'VONDA N. Mc INTYRE' is at the bottom.

VONDA N. Mc INTYRE