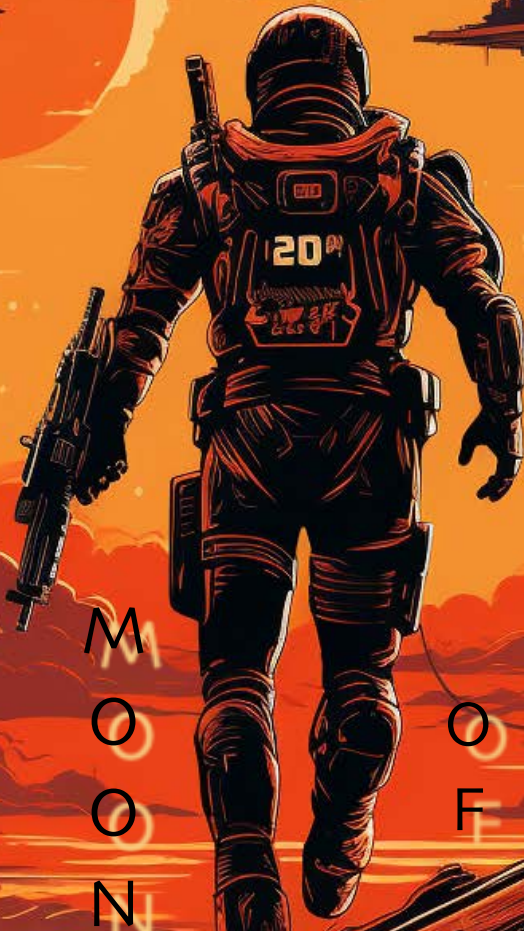


A Short Story



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MEMORY

BRYCE WALTON

A Short Story

MOON OF MEMORY

BRYCE WALTON



TINY WINDOWS

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Barstac found it hard to believe that this girl had helped him escape—until he learned her reason.

Barstac walked the mile across the red Martian plain. He felt but little emotion as he reached the resort building, and the sports rockets waiting on the other side. He had to get one of those rockets and get to Deimos—or die trying. One would be about as good as the other.

Then a slight tension grew in his stomach and sweat began to run down under his helmet and pressure suit, down his sharp nose and the burned face, as he started directly for the sports rockets.

He saw no one at all at first, then the gray-and-black-uniformed cop not ten feet away. The cop's helmet tilted and curious eyes studied Barstac. Barstac didn't wait for any further reaction; his face pulled into a tight scarred grin as he fired. The kinetic energy release burned away the side of the cop's head. A scream floated past from some onlooker, intensified by the communicator in Barstac's helmet.

Barstac ran. He was almost to one of the rockets and exhilaration filled him. He sensed an alien thing, so alien—freedom. Maybe freedom just for a while. Then he heard shouts and saw men running in like spokes into a wheel hub. He threw himself flat behind a loading truck someone had abandoned enroute to a supply rocket.

Superson guns. They wouldn't kill him ... against the law to kill criminals in the New System. More civilized to turn men into zombies for the rest of their lives in a mine three miles underground; they had to take him alive. A superson gun put a man out of action fast, but it didn't kill him. Sound waves tuned right could crack a man's helmet open; in Martian atmosphere that meant unconsciousness in a few seconds.

If they got a line on him he wouldn't have a chance to use his heat gun. He didn't intend to be taken. He'd get a few of them, and then have enough heat left to turn on himself.

Barstac shivered as part of the metal truck spanged and cracked like glass. They'd got a line on him all right, fast. He fired and three men

turned into smoke and red steam. The others disappeared behind rockets, sleds, and out-buildings; they could take their time.

A face appeared to his right. A man trying to edge away, but then he stopped. A tourist in a dude suit, all spangled and glittery, styled to the minute for Martian hunting. A face, young and pinched and shabby with fear. His arms dangled limply. His lips behind the helmet were tight with terror.

"Wait—" his voice sounded through the communicator. "Wait—please don't shoot! I'm unarmed. I won't—"

Barstac grinned. A gag. The guy took a step back and Barstac fired. A light charge right through the belly. The man folded to one side, his mouth stretching, closing, opening. He grasped his middle and blood ran through his fingers. He was on his knees, raising a red hand.

"Wait—don't—"

Barstac's next charge was heavier and it took off the man's head and helmet in a burst of flame.

Barstac was on his feet, long legs straining desperately, running. The sleek blue sports rocket slid across his path on its grav-plates. Far beyond it rose the high cubed buildings of the City of Sanskran looking very near although it was at least fifty miles away.

A woman's face stared out at him through the rocket's translucent nose, a beautiful face inside a platinum helmet. Barstac didn't stop to think; he leaped upward, swung himself to the top of the rocket's skin and pressed the stud that should open the cockpit. He grabbed desperately.

He screamed as he felt his helmet crack; they'd gotten a line. The frigid cold clutched his face. He choked for oxygen, tried to yell. He staggered back and collapsed across the top of the rocket.

He buried the opening on top of his helmet in his arms, released all available oxygen. It gave him a few seconds, but he couldn't move. He dimly saw the girl raise up through the cockpit. Nothing made any sense then. She had the heat gun in her hand and was firing. She was lifting him, throwing him over her shoulder, carrying him back toward the cockpit!

In this light gravity it wasn't a feat of strength. But it made no sense to Barstac. None at all. A woman he'd never seen, saving him. For what?

All the lights went out then. Barstac stopped being curious....

It was very still—somewhere. Very still.

Phobos shine came in through the plastex of the rocket and the controls were quiet in front of him. A dead sea bottom stretched away outside as far as anyone would want to see. Lichen and fungus, and a few of those big blind Martian beetles wandering, following the direction of the hurtling moon. And then Barstac saw Deimos rising, shining like a monstrous beckoning firefly through the night.

He felt a terrible lassitude. He just sat there, his head against the plastex looking out. He knew he wasn't alone in the rocket, but he didn't look at who was beside him; he stared upward at Deimos.

For ten years in that Martian Prison for Incurables, he had planned escape. And the only escape was to Deimos. Once, a man could escape into the unlimited expanse of the stars; but in the New System, the nets were too tight.

The eery light of the double moons bathed the rocket as the larger moon joined the smaller. Deimos was his only hope, if any remained. There, they said, a man neither lived, nor died, ever again. The Martians were kind, people said. But who really knew?

The Martians had retired quietly to Deimos when the Earthmen came to Mars. They had a peculiar alien culture, nebulous and utterly inhuman. With their floating, wispy, mist-like shapes that suggested incomputable age, shapes the moons could shine through, and their fog cities. No one bothered them on Deimos, a barren rock even Earth Companies couldn't justify exploiting. But the Martians had peculiar abilities. Inhuman they were, but they seemed to have great influence over the human mind and the nervous system. On Deimos, it was said, there were dreams for a man who had nothing else; anyone, even a man like Barstac, was safe on Deimos. Few ever came back from where only the lost went. And those who did come back, it was said, didn't remember.

And for Barstac certainly there was no place else to go.

Now, through circumstances beyond him, he had a rocket; he was away from the cops, and seemingly free. The girl—

His helmet had been removed. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the girl secretly in the other pilot seat, calmly smoking a paraette. Barstac saw the heat gun in her lap. He had a fondness for the weapon; it had taken him ten years to piece it together. The psyche boys at the prison with their intricate scanners had made a mistake with Barstac—maybe the only one they'd ever made since the New System, but even they weren't infallible; they hadn't uncovered his inventive ability, even though he'd always had it. They had put him in the shops down among the power tools and the atomic machines. Ten years was a long time to build a simple heat gun; it had taken patience.

His hand darted out fast, hooked the heat gun from her lap. She gasped, then sank back again and looked at him. She wore the regular sports outfit, the helmet, the thigh boots. An expensive piece of blonde goods, very expensive, with an oval face and pointed chin, skin light and very clear. She gave him a slow steady look that was like turning on a cyclotron. Her lithe figure reminded him. Sure, there'd been other—but so long ago.

"You can put the gun away," she said calmly. "Didn't I save your life? There may be trouble for me, but Daddy Sayers can always buy his daughter out of trouble. My name's Marian Sayers. Whatever it costs, the excitement's worth it!"

Sayers! When Barstac had been imprisoned ten years ago, Sayers had been one of the richest robber barons in the system. Probably the richest by now. What would Marian Sayers want with Barstac?

She laughed. It had a wild, odd sound. Her face had a wild look, too. "I heard someone say 'Barstac'," she said. "And then I had to get you out of there."

"Why?"

"You were the most infamous man in history when I was a little girl; I used to dream about you. And all at once, there was an old dream, and I could make it come true, so I did. All the credits in the world to spend, and dying of boredom. I've tried everything, and found nothing at all, Barstac."

"You've tried—Deimos?"

"Even Deimos. No one knowing of course. But—well, they have some pretty interesting things, but still only dreams. This is reality, Barstac."

Karl Barstac. I can call you Karl. I'll get out if you want and you can take my rocket. But—please! Take me with you!"

The vital animal warmth of her reached out to him and he put his arms around her and drew her close against him. He looked into her eyes and it was as if he looked into a book that was forbidden to him because of hidden secrets. His pulse pounded. She watched him mutely, only her parted lips trembled slightly. A small muscle at the corner of her mouth twitched. He slid his hands flat against her shoulders. Her lips parted and her tongue touched them for a moment. They were wet and glistening and she was firm and warm in his arms. Her head went back and she shut her eyes. He kissed her.

It was all right, he thought; then he looked above her blonde hair. She was probably cracked somewhere upstairs; filled with phony dreams of adventure and glamour and the devil knew what; intrigued by the name of a guy who really didn't live anymore. Maybe she didn't know it, didn't see the graying hair of him the way he saw it, nor the face so scarred it couldn't register emotion any more.

And if nothing else, she was good for a hostage. It was still a long way up to Deimos.

"Maybe we can get away," she whispered, her eyes closed. "I mean into space. Maybe you could do some of the things you did in the old days. We could live—for a while. I heard that once you stopped a ship enroute to Venus and lifted twenty billion in credits."

Sure, he remembered. He smiled thinly, but he didn't say anything. He didn't tell her that the days of the Barstacs were gone for good.

Finally he said, "Sure, you can come along. And thanks for the ride."

He took the rocket up himself. They were pursued for a while, but the sports rocket was a lot faster than any cop wagon this side of Earth. Marian didn't seem to care when she saw he was heading for Deimos instead of outer space. He explained about the big nets out there, and of how they'd have to figure out a way to get through. She kept looking at him with a kind of awe, her eyes wide and deeply dark. She talked about herself.

"We'll hole up here for a while," Barstac said. "Maybe we can find a way through the nets. You—you don't have to stay."

"I'll stay with you, Karl, right to the end."

"You say you've been here to Deimos before?"

She nodded, never taking her eyes from his hard, unemotional face. "All my life I guess I've been looking for something. Maybe I thought I'd find it on Deimos. I didn't; I found release there. I can find real life with you, maybe the kind that flames so high for a moment, but is worth a full lifetime of mundanity. I can find life with you, Karl, if you'll pardon my being so forward. Maybe it's death we're looking for, Karl. An escape from a system that's destroyed initiative. A system that's tied up the human heart in a bunch of laws and hooked them together into a big machine."

Deimos. A great barren rock, its soaring crags sharp as splintered steel. Masses of shadow dark as death, and splashes of brilliant color. And you spotted one of those misty, foggy looking Martian places here and there, wavering like something in a dream.

From the time the rocket settled on its grav-plates, from that moment on, things turned into a dream for Barstac. Marian seemed to know her way around. Not many had the guts to leave here once they came; but she had. A strong will there. An odd woman. One he would liked to have known—yesterday.

There was the music and the vapor that lulled him into lethargy, something like sleep, only it wasn't sleep. There seemed to be rooms, shifting, vague, translucent. And figures drifting like mist. He seemed to hear voices, but they were inside him, high, thin, like the sighing of plucked strings whispering in a low, dreaming distant key.

He heard Marian Sayer whisper. "Might as well enjoy it while we're here. There are dreams here, many dreams, Karl. Any you want. Rest a while, Karl, rest and sleep and later we'll plan what to do."

Yes, sure, he thought vaguely. That's why I'm here, no not that. I'm here because this is the end of the rocky road, and no further for me. He was drifting, sinking away, floating. He dimly saw her face above him, disembodied, her eyes strangely bright. The Martians were masters of something called mnemonics, he knew that. Masters of mental probing and the digging out of memory. Hypnosis or something like it, but way beyond that.

He was in a Martian city in a valley on Deimos, somewhere in a building, in a room. But he would never know the real shape of it, or what it really was.

Her voice whispered. "Karl—they understand humans; they don't hate us. They understand us better than we will ever understand ourselves. They know what we really want deep inside, and they can give us whatever it is. Don't worry about anything, Karl. I was here for a while, and I know about the dreams. I'll fix everything for you."

"Fine," he murmured. He was lying somewhere, he was floating—somewhere. It didn't matter where, not any more. Far away he heard her voice now. "Were you ever happy, Karl?"

"I don't remember. Happiness?" He tried to laugh.

"Can't you remember happiness, Karl?"

He whispered to her of things he had forgotten. Shadows and shapes appeared in the cloudy whiteness, ghostly and strange. Wavering outlines darkened and altered. He remembered. He hadn't for a long time, but he did now. In the asteroids where his Father had been a mucker, mining heavy beryllium, paired-atom stuff. And his Mother calling to him and he was running, laughing. Happiness. That was a long time back, and that was where happiness ended.

That was when the cops came and tried to take his Father for mining illegally and he had resisted. That was in the Old System, and they had shot him with an electron rifle. His body exploding, spraying the cold rocks with red and awful memory. And his Mother screaming and running, falling, drifting down a thousand feet into darkness, her screams fading ... fading....

Marian's voice came to him, softly. Music sang too, poignant, eery. Caressing, gentle, and indefinably sad.

"Poor Karl," she whispered. "Poor Karl." Dimly he saw her face, like a part of mist, and then he saw the gun reaching toward him out of the vapor.

Instinctively he started to reach for it, but he couldn't move. Drugged. He whispered. He felt very tired, tired and old. "What's the play? What—"

"I'm going to kill you, Karl."

"Kill me—"

"I felt sorry for you; I still do. But not sorry enough. I decided to kill you back there on Mars, and then when you came here, I thought of something else. I thought you would reveal something, something that would justify what you are. There wasn't enough. You never had a chance, Karl. You knew happiness, but it was too long ago. We're alone in this room, left to our dreams. But I'm not dreaming."

"I wish I was," Barstac said.

"I thought that here something would show inside of you so I wouldn't hate you so much. But I do. I hate you more than I can tell you. But it's enough so that I have to kill you."

"Why?" he whispered.

"I hate you so much that I wanted to kill you. I knew if the police got you, you wouldn't die. And I think death is a worse thing for you under the circumstances than to be returned to prison. So I got you out of there. I knew that sometime I would get a chance to kill you. So here it is. You're dreaming, Karl. But I'm not—I—"

"All that—the things you said—you were lying?"

"Partly. You were a romantic figure once, and what I said about myself—that was only the way it used to be. The Martians are therapists, in a way. If you want to leave you can, but for most the dreams are better. I left. I began to live, then, Karl. I married two weeks ago. It was a beautiful thing for me; I loved my husband. But you wouldn't understand. You never got a chance to learn. My husband was the man you killed down there by the truck. Remember, Karl. The man who was unarmed, who didn't know what it was all about, who begged you not to kill him? We came to Mars for our honeymoon, Karl. I was waiting for him in the rocket. He was coming to meet me—"

Her finger moved. Her face tightened. But he didn't feel anything. He heard her muted cry and then the voice as the Martian he had seen only vaguely before came back. The shape wavered ghost-like from the corner, and he heard the Martian again.

This is not a place for the old emotions. There is no revenge here. No death.

She screamed and screamed, her face twisting with hate. "I want to kill him! Let me, let me—!"

The Martian's thoughts were so calm and gentle, so old and wise. Relax, and sleep for a while. Maybe this time you'll want to stay with us here forever.

She didn't answer. Barstac closed his eyes again. He had remembered happiness, felt it, re-experienced it. And now he didn't want to die.

The Martian's thoughts were dimmer now, and Barstac drifted, and little fingers of crepuscular light fingered out toward him, alluring, disarming, and he drifted back, down the slide-board of time where pain and ugliness were no longer.

Far away, the Martian's voice, talking to Marian perhaps, Barstac didn't know.

Humans are sick. The sickest ones eventually come here. More and more will come. Someday perhaps we can help all of you find your way backward or forward to happiness, and out of the old seas of pain. Sleep, both of you. Sleep. There is only the happiness that was, or that might have been. There is no more pain.

And then Barstac was with his Father again, running down the steep slope under the bright promising light of a million stars frosty and marvelously clear. His Father was laughing. His own wild abandoned joy as he ran beneath the cloud rifts where the sunlight showed, brightening the ragged tops of the asteroid's great metal mountains.

He heard his mother calling to him, and he ran faster.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryce Walton (May 31, 1918 – February 5, 1988) was an American pulp fiction writer.

Walton was born in Blythedale, Missouri, the son of Paul Dean Walton and Golda Powers. He held various jobs starting in 1938, and attended Los Angeles Junior College 1939–41. During World War II, he served as a navy correspondent.[2] In 1945, he began a career as a freelance writer. He attended California State College from 1946 to 1947, then married photographer Ruth Arschinov on January 1, 1954.

He was credited as a writer for the TV serial *Captain Video and His Video Rangers*. He wrote three episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and two of his stories were adopted for the series, including "The Greatest Monster of Them All".

Walton was prolific under his own name and others in several genres in both literature and television. He wrote some science fiction as Paul Franklin, Kenneth O'Hara and Dave Sands, though his first story, "The Ultimate World" for *Planet Stories* in Winter 1945, was as Walton. He contributed actively to the magazines until about 1960, less frequently thereafter.



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