

SCIENCE FICTION

STORIES

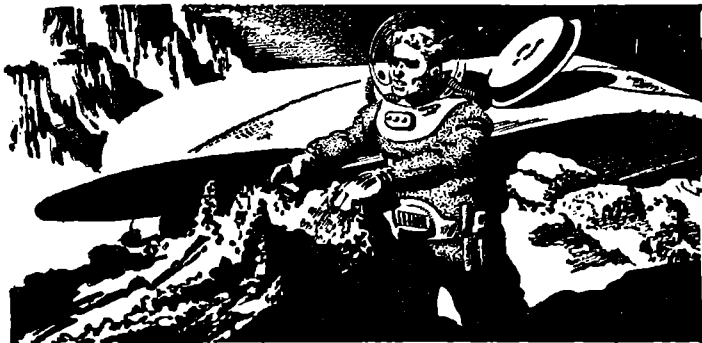
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We all have to die sometime, but it's more the manner of our going, and the reason why we must die when we do that's the rub.

By Earthlight

by BRYCE WALTON



THE rocket skin was like a dun-colored wall in the dim light under the hull. Three anonymous men who were beyond suspicion, who had worked on the rocket, were taking Barlow up in the elevator, up along the rocket's curving walls.

Earlier, scores of men had climbed up many ladders to various platforms where doors opened into the rocket's compartments for the insertion and repair of the many highly-specialized instruments.

It was still — so damn still here!

Some guards were way down below somewhere in the shadows, but they didn't notice anything. The three men were regular workers and there were last minute things to be done. It all looked quite logical.

Over in the blockhouse, some of America's most important political and military figures were sitting over instruments and charts, waiting, discussing.

One of the three men was talking, explaining things to Barlow about the rocket, about the pressure-suit he was to wear. Barlow listened and got it all straight. Barlow was helped into the suit. It weighed 700 pounds, and after they had encased him in it — all but the huge helmet-

plate — he lay there absolutely helpless, on a dolly, waiting to be rolled into the rocket's compartment.

The anonymous faces he'd never seen before, and would never see again, looked down at him. He blinked several times and moistened his lips. The suit was like a lead coffin. He didn't feel dead, but supposedly dead and unable to tell any one. A ridiculous way to feel!

What was the matter with him? He'd expected to die, all the time, from the start. Everybody died! Few could experience what he was experiencing. Death was worth this. One last kick, the biggest kick of all for Hal Barlow. You lived for kicks, so what was the matter?

He couldn't move his limbs; he could barely lift his head. Encased in 700 pounds of suit. Helpless. A pencil-flash flickered on and off. A couple of eyes shone. A whisper. "The kit is fastened to your belt. The instructions are in an air-tight capsule inside the kit. If you're caught, and the paper's removed, it will disintegrate; now we'll slide you inside."

The helmet slid over his face. It was absolutely dark. The suit, all-enclosing mobile shelter, atmosphere-pressure, temperature-control, mobility and electric power to manipulate tools. It's own power plant. It reprocessed continuously the precious air breathed by the occupant, putting it back into circulating supply after enriching it. The rocket was cold and alien and it would support no life; the suit alone protected him. The rocket was just metal and gadgets; only the suit stood between him and an agonizing death from acceleration, deceleration, extremes of heat and cold.

The dolly was rolling him in through the small opening. His encased body being slid, stuffed, jammed into something like a wad of ammo into a barrel. His body was entirely constricted. He couldn't hear anything. It was black. He could shift his massive helmet slightly. It clanged against metal, and the sound inside the helmet was like rusty thunder.

His blood boiled softly. He felt like a child shut up in the dark. He thought of the radio in the suit, and desperately manipulated the controls by the small control-panel in the metal hand of the suit.

The voices seemed to quiet whatever had been boiling up in him. He had started to scream; he remembered that now. Somehow, with an intense effort, he had suppressed the scream, clamped his teeth on it. Now the voices helped. He realized how much time had passed in the quick pressured dark. Voices preparing to send the first rocket to the moon. Quiet voices with all the suspense and tension held down by long military habit.

He had started being afraid. More than that. He had been going to scream. He — Hal Barlow! Where was the excitement, the great thrill, the big kick he had anticipated, to compensate for a voluntary dying?

He felt only anxiety. Afraid the terror would return. He had never admitted fear before. He thought back a little, trying to recall something that would explain the fear.

"X minus one!"

He felt as if an immense cyst of suppuration had burst inside of him. Sweat teared his eyes.

If they had psyched me, I'd know. I wouldn't be afraid. What would they have found? Why am I afraid now when I've never been afraid in my life?

Or had he? He couldn't remember. He tried to think of something immediate . . .

TWO HOURS before, Barlow had paused on the second floor of the men's barracks on the White Sands, New Mexico, Proving Grounds and looked out. He shivered a little. It was a lonely spot, maybe the loneliest in the world. Especially at night. Even here, Barlow managed to be with someone most of the time — but the same dullards got boring. Even women (like Lorraine), who said they loved him, were futile companions; a guy whose future was death couldn't get emotionally involved.

He went into his three-room dump and switched on the radio at once. He needed the sound of voices and the music. He started to undress in the dark. But the cold and frigid moonlight came in and shone on the bed; it revealed the body lying there. The face looking up at Barlow was his own! His breath thinned. His hands were wet.

It did him a lot more justice than any mirror, or the reflection in a woman's eyes. The half-boyish, half-man face with the thin wiry lips, the blond curling hair and the sun-burned, cynical face. The blue eyes that seemed never quite able to smile. The face on the bed never would; it was dead.

Barlow turned. Part of the shadow in the corner moved. A voice. "D-716."

The 16 meant that this was that number among the hundred possible goals of duty and sacrifice. The D of course meant Death, and Barlow had known since having been given the number years ago what his end would be.

There were many other ways, some worse than dying. Loss of identity

by plastic surgery. Barlow's appearance had been thoroughly altered three times. Some had volunteered for the torture and concentration camps of the East. Barlow had done that, too; anything for kicks.

He'd never bothered to indoctrinate himself with the philosophy of the Brotherhood with its seven rituals of self-denial and discipline, its long program of learning the love of humanity, the unity of each with all people and with the Universe.

He had his own philosophy. You were born, and then you died; the rest was just a living job.

You lived as an individual, and not as a cog — if you had the guts for it. You lived for the excitement and the thrill of danger and the maintenance of individuality — if you could. Otherwise you might as well die when you were born — because then the stretch between wasn't worth the price.

That was Barlow's way. Only the *manner* of dying was important. Everybody had to die. All that the Brotherhood really worked for was the goal of enabling everybody to live as long as possible, and finally to die with dignity and moral integrity. Barlow didn't need their philosophy; basically, that was all he, too, really wanted — maybe.

The man was indistinct in the shadows. An anonymous figure without a name. "The man on the bed has made the supreme sacrifice for the cause."

"So he's dead," Barlow said casually. "So what?"

"It took a lot of work to make such an exact resemblance. One of our members brought him in through the guards in a supply truck. It's easy to bring in a dead man who'll never go back out — except as someone who was already in. You of course."

"No one will know what is to happen to the real me then?"

"No one. It will be assumed that you committed suicide."

Barlow grinned thinly.

"There's been no change in your attitude? Your willingness to —"

"Die? None. Willing Barlow, always ready to drop dead at a moment's notice."

"You're the only one of the Brotherhood who's never submitted to the rituals and the psyching; we hope that isn't bad. Your service has been excellent. But I wish you had submitted to a psyching before this assignment, because there's one basic weakness, an Achilles Heel, in everyone, and on an assignment so vital as this, it would be worth knowing, in advance . . ."

"Get someone else if you're worried."

"You're the only member we have, who's inside the grounds here, who can stand the acceleration and deceleration."

"Ah," Barlow exclaimed. "This sounds big."

"It couldn't be bigger," the anonymous man said. "Than a one-way trip to the moon!"

THE MAN explained some things to Barlow. Barlow didn't say anything. Maybe there was a slight tremor in his lips, but he didn't think so.

The first man into space. The first man to the Moon!

". . . a world atomic war may break within six months. In spite of propaganda being fed to the people, trying to paint this atomic war as just another war, we know it will probably be the last war, the end of civilization. So our philosophical revolution, the revolution of men's minds, will begin in approximately six months from tonight. But if this last war breaks, our centuries-old plan will fail; it will never even materialize.

"The revolution is quite delicate. Simultaneously, all over the world, at a specific time, and under rigidly-controlled and favorable circumstances, the movement we have been building so long will spring up. Nothing can stop it then, once the spiritual fires begin to burn! But it can't begin until the exact scheduled moment. Your job will be to attempt to prolong this present 'peace' until our plan can go into effect. That's why you're making this trip to the moon."

Barlow laughed. "That doesn't mean a damn thing to me. To me, the only important thing is that I'm the first man into space. That's enough for anyone to know."

"Is it?"

"I'm just Hal Barlow, a guy who's had several other names, and who's really only a number! I joined the Brotherhood for kicks, not lectures! I'll do this job, in my own way, because I want to do it. For Hal Barlow!"

The man in the shadows nodded slowly. "Can't you feel what it means? Our spiritual revolution? You've read some of the works we've printed on it. This feeling of oneness with humanity. That's the real value. Can't you —"

Barlow said. "Isn't the offer of my life enough?"

The shadow said. "Maybe — for us, for people. But what about you? Maybe there are some things even you can't face alone. And think of those people out there; they need and cling to each other, even to each

others' madness. Living in futile hope while going on down the crazy toboggan-ride to their own destruction. The living loudly and in public, because to be silent allows reality to enter in on feet of terror; and because 'to be alone' means madness. The simulated gaiety of the bars every night, with the shadows outside that never seem to go away, even under the glare of neon. They've never had a chance to plan, to live with any hope for the future. Burdened down by anxiety, they've built up a defense of falseness, and underneath, the terrible fear of the atomic bomb is a constant inner sickness!"

Barlow grinned. "A nice speech, but I already know those things. What I'm really interested in is what I'm supposed to do."

So the man explained to Barlow some things about why he was going on a one-way trip to the moon in a rocket intended for no man to be in, in a rocket intended for no living thing.

After the man had gone, Barlow quickly snapped on the radio again, and he felt better with the music and human voices. For a moment there, he had seemed to feel a tinge of fear. What the devil? Psyche-screening? So he was capable of fear; who wasn't? He didn't need psyching. What indignity to the individual — to have the fingerprints of psychiatrists all over your brain!

I'm Hal Barlow! The first man into space. The first man to the Moon!

He had gotten to the rocket-launching site early and had sat in the moonlight smoking a cigarette. He felt odd inside and he didn't know why. The moon had a cold effect on him. He was worried, about himself.

The whole area had been painted and disguised with all the arts of camouflage; everything appearing from the air looked like sand and sage and rock and hill. The rocket itself was built inside the hill, which served as a giant launching-barrel to guide the rocket with the exact accuracy demanded in its take-off.

The moon had loomed large and still and cold.

“. . . ten, nine, eight . . .”

So he was back inside the suit, inside the rocket, jammed into a barrel like a wad of ammo. Now he was beginning to see what might cause his terror. His Achilles Heel. But it was too late. What would they have found if they'd psyched him?

A wild kid — old, but still driven by the urges of a kid who hadn't grown up. A lot of surface things, the inside of him covered over. Obsessed with exterior things, he had never given himself a chance to see inside himself. Afraid. Always been with people, beer, women, bars, juke-boxes, noises, excitement. Never alone —

No parents that he could remember. He'd run away from the middle-west orphanage and heard about the Brotherhood from a friendly priest and the priest had taken him into the organization. Strictly for kicks though, Barlow had warned. The priest had smiled with wisdom — "You don't know your own true motives, my boy."

"... seven, six, five, four ..."

JUST HAL BARLOW. That was all right, but the real Hal Barlow was unknown. He'd never realized, with all his screaming about individualism, how much he'd depended on people. He had loved no one. He had seemed to love them when he was with them, but could never form any solid associations. Now all the people he had never really known became as shadows thrown upon the wall of his brain. He felt the sweat soaking his skin. Alone. Destined for it like a twin, whose double has died at birth. Always — in league with those on the other side of the looking-glass.

"... three ... two ..."

He screamed; *no, I can't do it, I can't face it —*

Someone — listen —

The dull muted explosion miles away, and the terrific compression and the wash of numbing, deafening sound beating back around him. Everything inside him seeming to whirl up and come down in a crash. The seeming to slide around in the dihedrals of time and space, slipping in and out of being like a ball-bearing in a maze . . .

First man to the moon. In a rocket meant for no man. Not a rocket. A coffin — on a one-way trip —

And I — maybe the one, the very one they should never have sent.

With each degree of returning consciousness, more and more capacity for fighting the fear. He cursed the fear and wrestled with it like a man with an invisible opponent down an endless flight of stairs.

He felt too alone, isolated; then he thought of the readings. They could be flashed into a small screen in the face-plate by manipulating the fingers of his right hand. He tried to concentrate on the readings as an aid in fighting the fear.

. . . in the stratosphere, eighty kilometers, racket's temperature minus a hundred and fifty degrees. Hundred and twenty-five kilometers, lower part of ionosphere, up plus one hundred and fifty — and then on up where it was somewhere around a thousand degrees, and who cared? He was beyond that — away way out — somewhere —

It went on a long time and then . . . nothing but darkness . . . the lonely song of the gyroscopes. His own voice . . . distant, alien . . . raving . . . a kind of delirium . . . then sometime, an awareness of the cutting down of power, the brief warning of intuition, the concussion. And as consciousness came back again, the knowing that he had hit too hard in spite of the lighter moon gravity.

His head throbbing crazily and around him the absolute darkness and silence and the warm ache in his head, the dizziness and the warm stickiness flowing down his face.

He lay there, afraid of retching. He moved his finger to release more oxygen. He could smell himself, the sharp bite of fear and the odor of blood.

He felt panic. He experimented. He could move easily here where the seven-hundred pound suit weighed only 140 pounds. He switched on the suit's light beam. The anonymous man had said, "*Get out of the rocket at once, silently!*"

He squeezed out of the barrel, into the larger compartment. He got the compartment door open. Half blind by shock, he was out in the Lunar night. "*When you get outside, stop right there. Read the instructions!*"

He had a panicky desire to fall to his knees, cling to the rocket. He stood there stiffly. "It isn't fair," he whispered over and over. "I can't do it!"

Read the instructions.

ALONE, a man — one man — on the moon. No movement, no sound, no air, no life. Only sharp black and white contrast of lifeless shadow to accentuate the awful and final loneliness. Occasional meteors striking into the pumice dust — silently, voicing the stillness of his own terror.

He read the instructions. He hooked the capsule out of the kit, opened it. The suit's single light beaming like a Cyclopean eye.

The giant walls of Albategnius the center of the moon's visible disk towered bleakly up around . . . everywhere . . . lifelessness, just broken rock . . . no water to erode. No voices, no faces, no life anywhere. Just Barlow. Barlow and a rocket.

And the stars and somewhere, the earth in the sky, sharp as molten steel in the eyes. The rocket watched him and listened. This was a target rocket. 240,000 miles away in the New Mexico blockhouse, they were watching through the rocket's eyes, feeling through the rocket's

mechanical nervous system. The rocket carried instruments to test out flight calculations, controls, conditions on the moon. It carried self-operating information about the range of temperatures, radiation, gravitational influences and other conditions to be encountered on the journey and here on the moon's surface. It wouldn't return; only the results of its sensory apparatus were returning now and would keep on returning until the rocket's power ran out.

The rocket was equipped with every kind of instrument — trackers, telemeters, and it was sending back sound and sight like a human eye and ear. Radar stations, television stations, G.E. wagons down there receiving information from the rocket . . .

The instructions told Barlow exactly where to stand so the television-eyes could pick up his image. He found himself leaning in using the kit, getting the radio apparatus out of his suit connected properly.

He was starting, making gestures, while the terrible fear of loneliness and isolation, his Achilles Heel, made the alien surroundings reel and slip and tremble as though at any moment he was going to crumble, fail, surrender.

The bleeding from his nose and ears had stopped. No pain; that wasn't the trouble. It was being alone, the idea of dying alone . . .

The bulbous suit carried him over the terrain. Clouds of pumice-dust drifted. He felt like an infant walking, his feet threatening to fold under him. The rocket seemed to be drawing him back toward it. It seemed warm and friendly as he walked the required distance away from it. On Earth they were seeing him now — a man on the moon where there should be no men. He would explain it to them; that was his job. To give them an explanation that would frighten them, freeze the inevitable war-drift for six months more. So the Brotherhood could act — the Brotherhood only needed time.

But what about Barlow? Sure, everybody had to die, but no one should have to die the way Barlow is being asked to. He couldn't do it!

But he stood there, and the rocket transmitted his image and his words back to the blockhouse at White Sands, New Mexico. He said what the instructions told him to.

"We've been observing you; we saw the rocket coming in. You think you're the first to send a rocket here, but you're not. We've been here quite a while. Long enough to have set up a small colony. We've built a city near a uranium mine. There are large processing works, rocket installations and living quarters. There are atomic warhead rockets too . . ."

He stopped. His legs were weak, so much pressure for such light gravity . . .

. . . rockets on the moon's dark side, out of your reach. But we can reach you. The world is just a target rotating beneath us. We have unlimited deposits of uranium and other radioactive metals; you are completely helpless. Any further attempts to come to the moon will meet with destruction. We will enforce peace if we can. Any indication down there of any power planning to start a war, and we'll send our own atomic warhead rockets down.

"We are primarily scientists and technicians. The annihilation of civilization would have been inevitable anyway, so we've nothing to lose by this last attempt to maintain peace by the only means left — by force. We'll bomb any power that attempts to launch atom bombs, or begins any form of military aggression. And remember — no more rockets to the moon!

"And who are we? WE are not America, Russia, France, Britain, Yugoslavia, China, Japan, Italy, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, Canada, Texas, or any South American country. We are no country at all. We are of ALL countries. We are here to protect all countries from every other country, and we will try to do this by force if necessary. Remember — no more rockets to the moon. We will atom-bomb any nation attempting any form of military aggression.

THE BROTHERHOOD was very old, the outgrowth of an ancient Eastern philosophical cult of non-resistance and peace. With six months more, the Brotherhood could win the peace, maybe forever. If the speech just-made frightened the Americans enough, they wouldn't try anything. The only other powers that might start a war within six months were Russia, China, Yugoslavia. And they were too uncertain as to whether or not America had already reached the moon. Who controlled the Moon controlled Earth. They had been afraid for some time that perhaps America had already gotten to the moon. Mutual fear of retaliation had postponed the last war this long.

The Brotherhood knew social-psychology. They figured this would work.

Barlow felt himself backing away from the rocket. They were watching him, the rocket's eyes and ears. Taking his voice and image back to earth, back to voices and laughter and music and sound and warmth and women . . . with a sob, he twisted away from the rocket, turned, fell

to his thighs in thick pumice dust, kept on struggling through lazy streaming dust ribbons and he didn't look back. He was watched; he mustn't look back at the rocket again.

Meteors exploded soundlessly on the beds of lava and seas of dust, shooting up thick motionless sprays that seemed almost solid. Above him, like splintered steel, stretched the thousands of feet of crater wall. He reached the sharp wall of rock, managed to get around it and out of sight of the rocket. He fell. He lay there, his suit blending with the cold and airless landscape.

He screamed. He clawed his way up, started back again, back toward the rocket. Hell with the Brotherhood. He was for Hal Barlow. Just for Hal Barlow. He'd tell the truth. It wouldn't be long then. They'd send other rockets up then. This was for Hal Barlow. The isolation pressed in, pressed him faster, throwing him crazily over the dust toward the rocket. Then they'd know the truth, send up other rockets, . . . not this way, with no more sounds, voices, any moving thing. No way for a man to die . . .

It wasn't death; it was the way of dying. No one should die this way — so alone. Especially Barlow, who feared loneliness more than anything else.

He fell. One foot slid into a crack filled with pumice dust fine as powder. He hooked the big steel hooks on the ends of his arms at the rock, and clung there, his helmet barely pushing up through the dust. He struggled for a while, desperately with his mind filling with visions of the rocket. He wanted to live now, make up for all the living he'd missed for so long.

He looked around, still struggling. Light gravity, little weight, but he was so weak now, and still the rocket wasn't in sight. He crawled on his stomach, dragging the bulbous suit over the rock. He could get around the rock. He had to. Out of sight, but so near, was the warm human rocket.

He ran into the rock and collapsed with a long wet sigh. He gasped. Pain throbbled damply over his chest. He moved . . . just enough to turn over on his back. He slid up a little so that he was sitting there staring at the frigid, barren, naked emptiness of utter silence and desolation. What had the man said? *"No man is alone who has learned the secret of oneness with the world . . . ?"*

He thought about the Brotherhood, seriously now, for the first time. Many men before him had died for it. An entirely new approach to society and the individual. Working from the inside out, there would

be more than a mere deflection of evil. There would be suppression at the source, in the individual will.

An end of national idolatry that threatened the existence of civilization. Man was superhuman in power and glory, subhuman in morality. After the spiritual revolution, never again the monstrous evils arising when remote abstractions like "nation" and "state" are regarded as realities more concrete and significant than human beings.

And no man is an island unto himself . . .

Unity

He looked up. He saw the Earth then.

It shone down upon him through the Lunar night, twenty times brighter than moonlight. He felt warmth. There were faces in the shadows, hopeful women's faces and the eager innocent faces of children who had not yet learned hopelessness and hate. They might never learn it now.

He grinned. It was funny, you had to get so far away to look back and see all the people on earth as one, one face, one heart — one world — it looked like one world from here.

It wasn't cold as Barlow lay there and looked up at the bright shining disk. He closed his eyes. The Earthlight seemed to warm him, as the sunlight had once warmed him, long ago in childhood, on a lazy summer afternoon.



BRYCE WALTON Late in 1944, an unusual short story entitled, "The Ultimate World," appeared in print, under the by-line of Bryce Walton. It was not long before the name became familiar to the magazine audience for science fiction, and Mr. Walton was doing feature novelets. His novel, "Sons of the Ocean Deeps," was published by the John C. Winston Company, last year.