

TERMINUS EST

by Barry N. Malzberg

We have photographed it, dropped rockets onto it, and flown around it. And now we have landed on it. After exploration we will surely have to establish the Lunar settlements so dear to the hearts of the science fiction writers. This is a classic theme of SF, and it has not been ignored by the newer writers—of which Malzberg is one of the absolute best. Most of his work has been done under a pen name, so it is pleasant to welcome the author out of the shadows of anonymity with this nice, though more than a little gruesome story of our airless satellite.

There's nothing really doing on the Moon. Hasn't been for some time, you know; the resort business was good for a while and there was a certain novelty appeal to the whole gig—expanding the frontiers of the universe, and all that—but it faded away rapidly. Nowadays, the city itself is practically vacant, except for the hundred or so (*it's* a pretty stable population) who hang on for their subsidized make-it and the outlaw colonies who are rumored to be in the craters. Me, I can't stand the place; I haven't even been off the ship to see it for the last six months, due to certain events. This may be unusual, considering the fact that we make the jaunt three times a week, back and forth, with a two-hour layover time. The Moon might have been something in the old days: it has the look. Some of the cabins and villas under the Dome have a rococo elegance and, even through the masks, one can smell the residue of old litter through the surrounding spaces. It has the aspect—the whole thing—of Coney Island late on a July Sunday after a particularly crowded weekend, and although I'm hardly an expert on the Moon—just the motorman on the shuttle, that's me—I sure as hell know about Coney Island. I went there often, years ago, and I still try to get out once a month or so when it's in season. There's more action there on a bad Friday than there has ever been in the whole history of the Moon, and I'm not averse to action. Of most kinds.

The trouble with the Moon is that it was a fad and like most crazes it ran out quickly past a point of diminishing return. A lot of people who I know personally got sunk in real estate and various lands of speculation, which surrounded the nonsense of 2080—the Moon as the New Frontier, the Moon as the next barrier for tourism and so on. The whole campaign was, of course, cooked up by no more than twelve clever people in a total of maybe four offices and after they cleaned out, there was very little left. Certainly, little enough left on the Moon. The entire experience of commutation is depressing, and although I tell my wife I'm lucky to have it—I'm thirty-five and that means I'm washed up in the airlines; it's either this or some kind of control job at Kennedy—the fact is that I do look forward, very much, to mandatory retirement at the end of the year. I won't quit because it might blow the pension, but I'm not going to ask for any extensions. The retirement pay will be pretty fair and what I actually want to do is to retire to the country and raise pigs.

Pigs as companions would compare favorably with the bohemian colonies which are the last outpost of human energy on the Moon. As I say, there are about a hundred of these people-loosely organized into ten of what they call "clans"—living under the Dome in all kinds of peculiar relationships, and with little references to the realities which left them there in the first place. Generally speaking, these are the children of the resort people who went broke; they hang on because they had been raised there and staying was easier than going back to Earth and making something of themselves. Despite the huge costs of maintenance under the Dome, the Government is largely willing to foot the expense because, for

whatever reason, the bohemians keep us short of total evacuation, and it's not in human nature to admit to a disaster as total as the Moon boondoggle was. Congress some years ago cheerfully voted the massive appropriations that keep my little crew, my ship and myself trundling in the darkness to drop off supplies and good news at their end, and to bring home an occasional corpse and a lot of bad news from there. Bohemians are all the time getting cut up in their so-called feuds and the Government has been very strict on the matter of Moon burials: there will be none. Perhaps the true horror of the swindle only assaults us at the moment of someone's death there; to bury on the Moon would be a complete severance from our history. Just a speculation; I'm not very good at this sort of thing.

The reason I have not been out on the Moon for six months has to do with events occurring the last time I went out. As a matter of fact, it was an experience which made me swear off the Moon forever. I'm perfectly willing to sweat out a pension by running a messenger service, but there is no reason at all to get involved with the subjects on one end, and I came to that decision without any regrets the time I saw the bohemian couple lying locked with one another on the very edges of the Dome. I found myself walking right toward them on my last time through and I was damned if I was going to turn to their convenience.

They were literally perched up against the walls, as close to making a conjunction, I suppose, as it is possible in Moon gear, and quite oblivious to my approach. The boy had taken off some of his bottom castings and arranged his helmet in a strange way so that it concealed all of him but his mouth. One of their newer perversions, I suppose. The girl was lying straddled across him, her face in his lap, her hands somewhere in the vicinity of his shoulder-joints.

It made no difference to me at all. They could do what the hell they wanted, it livened up *the* blasted place. But I caught a piece of rock in a heel and went down, slowly, on my posterior end there was something of a clatter. When I stood up, they had broken apart and were staring at me.

"What are *you* doing here?" the girl said. "Who are you?"

"I'm the commander of the *Enterprise*," I said, "and I'm taking a walk around the Dome. What's the difference? Who's bothering you?"

"What's the difference he asks," the girl said. She turned to the boy. "Tell him what the difference is."

"I *know* you," the boy said. "You're the litde idiot who loves to come by and make speeches in our meetings about how we're all escapists and we should come home to the real world. I know you damned well."

"I don't care what you do," I said. I meant it, at least in the particular. Although I could make efforts now and then to talk sense to them collectively, it was really none of my business what individual idiots wanted to do. For that matter, it was not my fault that service compels me, now and then under the contract, to give a kind of reenlistment talk to the troops. "You can stay here and grow old for all I care. You can even bring children onto the Moon, if you can stand it"

"Get this," the girl said in a high voice. "Listen to him; he thinks he's clever."

"I don't like idiots," the boy said, standing slowly and tilting his helmet so that I could see his eyes. "I don't like them on my territory and I particularly don't like asinine platitudes. I'm just coked up enough to beat the hell out of this guy, if you don't mind, Deborah."

"I don't mind at all," she said. "As a matter of fact, I'll sit and watch."

"Now listen," I said. "I don't even know who the two of you are. Outside the Dome, I have nothing to do with you at all. I was just taking a walk, and I'm going back to my ship. So let's adjourn this." I was trying to be reasonable. Even with scum, I'm told it pays.

"Sure he's going back," the girl said. "Into the little ship and off in the sky. What do you want to be when you grow up, baby, a pilot?"

But you can't be decent They'll get you all the time, although you should know better. I felt the old, painful congested rage moving within me. I think that all things being equal, then, I might have hit her, but the boy got to me first.

He caught me with a sneak punch behind the right ear where the metal is thin, and he must have knocked me out for a moment, because the next thing I knew, I was already in the process of getting up and he was looking at me, leering. I was in pain. His eyes, full and round, seemed to take the terrible knowledge from me, but what he did was to hit one fist against the other. I could hear them clang.

"Good," he said. "Here we go again."

"No. Don't do it," I said. "I'm warning you, now, I don't want to get involved, but you better not try a thing more."

"Got that," he said, and threw a fist at me, missed, and poised again.

That was when I lost control. "You trash," I screamed and took my gun from the inner pocket, and shot him, just once, in the head. The projectile went all the way through, of course, just as they said it would. He fell in front of me.

"He's dead," the girl said. "You killed him." But she didn't move.

But I was still concentrating on the boy. "You son of a bitch," I said, and shot him again, for good measure, then in the fit that I could barely understand, but had had too often to resist, I turned on the girl and raised the gun to her eyes.

"You want it too?" I said.

She shook her head and said nothing. Her eyes rolled and she staggered back.

could do it, you know. I don't have to put up with this kind of thing from the likes of you. Nobody wants you. Back on Earth, you don't even exist except as a convenient statistic. I could wipe out the whole, damned colony and say it was one of your feuds and that would be the end of the whole thing."

"No," she said, still hacking. "No, no. What's wrong with you?"

There was plenty, but I was far gone. They had touched, together, the reservoir of pain, grief, need within me. And they'll do it to you every time, long past the point when you can take it any more.

"I won't put up with it," I said to her flatly, and shot the girl through the heart. She fell before me soundlessly, the metal of her suit gliding to rock as if it were rubber.

I was still angry. I could have incinerated the Moon itself if I had had the equipment

But I managed to put away the gun and got back to the ship.

I thought about filing a report on it, but decided not to: they could as likely have killed each other. Probably would have, eventually, if I hadn't interceded. So I simply made a note in the log to that effect—that I had found the two bodies scattered in a crater-and left it at that.

I haven't been outside since. My two-man crew brings the mail and messages back to me. I know perfectly well that the colony knows what happened and what I did, but that's all right with me because there's nothing they can do. Filth, discards, their word means nothing to Earth, and I transmit all the word myself, anyway. And if one or two of them ever wanted to go back to report what happened, they'd have to go in my ship.

So the hell with them.

The hell with the whole boondoggle. My year ends in three months and I'm going.

Aside from the events I've transcribed here to explain my feelings, nothing ever happens on the Moon.