

Night Meeting

By Ray Bradbury

Before going up into the blue hills, Tomás Gomez stopped for gasoline at the *lonely* station.

“Kind of *alone* out here, aren’t you, Pop?” said Tomás. The old man wiped off the windshield of the small truck.

“Not bad.”

“How do you like Mars, Pop?”

“Fine. Always something new. I made up my mind when I came here last year I wouldn’t expect nothing, nor ask nothing, nor be surprised at nothing. We’ve got to forget Earth and how things were. We’ve got to look at what we’re in here, and how different it is. I get a hell of a lot of fun out of just the weather here. It’s Martian weather. Hot as hell daytimes, cold as hell nights. I get a big kick out of the different flowers and different rain. I came to Mars to retire and I wanted to retire in a place where everything is different. An old man needs to have things different. Young people don’t want to talk to him, other old people bore hell out of him. So I thought the best thing for me is a place so different that all you got to do is open your eyes and you’re entertained. I got this gas station. If business picks up too much, I’ll move on back to some other old highway that’s not so busy, where I can earn just enough to live on and still have time to feel the different things here.”

“You got the right idea, Pop,” said Tomás, his brown hands idly on the wheel.

He was feeling good.

He had been working in one of the new colonies for ten days straight and now he had two days off and was on his way to a party. “I’m not surprised at anything any more,” said the old man. “I’m just looking. I’m just experiencing. If you can’t take Mars for what she is, you might as well go back to Earth. Everything’s crazy up here, the soil, the air, the canals, the natives (I never saw any yet, but I hear they’re around), the clocks. Even my clock acts funny.

Even *TIME* is crazy up here. Sometimes I feel *I’m here all by myself*, no one else on the whole damn planet. I’d take bets on it. Sometimes I feel about eight years old, my body squeezed up and everything else tall. Jesus, it’s just the place for an old man. Keeps me alert and keeps me happy. You know what Mars is? It’s like a thing I got for Christmas seventy years ago — don’t know if you ever had one — they called them kaleidoscopes, bits of crystal and cloth and beads and pretty junk.

You held it up to the sunlight and looked in through at it, and it took your breath away. All the patterns! Well, that’s Mars. Enjoy it. Don’t ask it to be nothing else but what it

is. Jesus, you know that highway right there, built by the Martians, is over sixteen centuries old and still in good condition? That’s one dollar and fifty cents, thanks and good night.”

Tomás drove off down the ancient highway, laughing quietly.

It was a long road going into darkness and hills and he held to the wheel, now and again reaching into his lunch bucket and taking out a piece of candy. He had been driving steadily for an hour, with no other car on the road, no light, just the road going under, the hum, the roar, and Mars out there, so quiet. Mars was always quiet, but quieter tonight than any other. The deserts and empty seas swung by him, and the mountains against the stars.

There was a smell of *TIME* in the air tonight. He smiled and turned the fancy in his mind. There was a thought.

WHAT DID TIME SMELL LIKE?

Like dust and clocks and people.

And if you wondered what *TIME* sounded like it sounded like

water running in a dark cave and voices crying and dirt dropping down upon hollow box lids, and rain.

And, going further,

WHAT DID TIME LOOK LIKE?

TIME looked like snow dropping silently into a black room

or it looked like

a silent film in an ancient theater, one hundred billion faces falling like those New Year balloons, down and down into nothing.

That was how *TIME* smelled and looked and sounded. And tonight — Tomás shoved a hand into the wind outside the truck — tonight you could almost touch *TIME*

He drove the truck between hills of *TIME*. His neck prickled and he sat up, watching ahead.

He pulled into a little dead Martian town, stopped the engine, and let the *silence come in around him*. He sat, not breathing, looking out at the white buildings in the moonlight. *Uninhabited for centuries*. Perfect, faultless, in ruins, yes, but perfect, nevertheless.

He felt very good, very much at peace.

He started the engine and drove on another mile or more before stopping again, climbing out, carrying his lunch bucket, and walking to a little promontory where he could look back at that dusty city. He opened his thermos and poured himself a cup of coffee. A night bird flew by.

Perhaps five minutes later there was a sound. Off in the hills, where the ancient highway curved, there was a motion, a dim light, and then a murmur.

Tomás turned slowly with the coffee cup in his hand. And out of the hills came a strange thing. It was a machine like a jade-green insect, a praying mantis, delicately rushing through the cold air, indistinct, countless green diamonds winking over its body, and red jewels that glittered with multifaceted eyes.

Its six legs fell upon the ancient highway with the sounds of a sparse rain which dwindled away,

and from the back of the machine a Martian with melted gold for eyes looked down at Tomás as if he were looking into a well.

Tomás raised his hand and thought Hello! automatically but did not move his lips, for this was a Martian.

But Tomás had swum in blue rivers on Earth, with strangers passing on the road, and eaten in strange houses with strange people, and his weapon had always been his smile. He did not carry a gun. And he did not feel the need of one now, even with the little fear that gathered about his heart at this moment.

The Martian’s hands were empty too. For a moment they looked across the cool air at each other.

It was Tomás who moved first.

“Hello!” he called.

“Hello!” called the Martian in his own language.

They did not understand each other.

“Did you say hello?” they both asked.

“What did you say?” they said, each in a different tongue.

They scowled.

“Who are you?” said Tomás in English.

“What are you doing here?” In Martian; the stranger’s lips moved.

“Where are you going?” they said, and looked bewildered.

“I’m Tomás Gomez.”

“I’m Muhe Ca.”

Neither understood, but they tapped their chests with the words and then it became clear.

And then the Martian laughed. “Wait!” Tomás felt his head touched, but **NO HAND HAD TOUCHED HIM**

“There!” said the Martian in English. “That is better!”

“You learned my language, so quick!”

“Nothing at all!”

They looked, embarrassed with a new silence, at the steaming coffee he had in one hand.

“Something different?” said the Martian, eying him and the coffee, referring to them both, perhaps.

“May I offer you a drink?” said Tomás.

“Please.”

The Martian slid down from his machine.

A second cup was produced and filled, steaming. Tomás held it out.

Their hands met and — **LIKE MIST** — fell through each other.

“Jesus Christ!” cried Tomás, and dropped the cup.

“Name of the gods!” said the Martian in his own tongue.

“Did you see what happened?” they both whispered.

They were very cold and terrified.

The Martian bent to touch the cup but **COULD NOT TOUCH IT**

“Jesus!” said Tomás.

“Indeed.” The Martian tried again and again to get hold of the cup, but could not. He stood up and thought for a moment, then took a knife from his belt. “Hey!” cried Tomás. “You misunderstand, catch!” said the Martian, and tossed it. Tomás cupped his hands. The knife fell through his flesh. It hit the ground. Tomás bent to pick it up but he **COULD NOT TOUCH IT** and he recoiled, shivering.