

The late evening traffic was light on 66. The Chevy made good time and by eleven I was in open desert. After almost three hours behind the wheel I needed to stretch out. My legs were sore from the beating I'd taken the night before and I wanted to get the blood circulating to help heal the bruising faster. There was a big, full moon in the sky and I could see a turn off ahead of me, so I hung a left onto a dirt track that snaked away from the highway. I bumped along for ten minutes or so and eased the car forward until I was on a bluff overlooking the desert floor.

I switched off the engine and let the silence sink in as I knocked back a couple of cups of java from the thermos. Then I gently levered myself out of the Chevy. The cold of the night and the hot coffee helped clear the cobwebs from my head. I leaned back against the warmth of the hood and slowly inhaled the clean desert air. It was good to get out of LA, away from the smog, the noise and the madness.

I'd always liked the desert. It made think me of that Nat King Cole song, 'Nature Boy', just me and the elements. Something about the sheer scale of the place made it easy to feel truly alone. The moon was bright enough for me to walk around the car without needing a flashlight. I tried to rub some of the pain out of my legs as I moved but it didn't help much. I sat back on the hood again and let my mind wander. The star-studded sky that stretched above and over me seemed so close that I felt I could just reach up and grab a handful of stardust. I could be on another world, on Mars perhaps. Yeah, I bet Mars looked just like this. Mountains, endless deserts and strange alien shapes out in the vast, moonlit wilderness. This was Ray Bradbury territory. A backdrop to the 'Martian Chronicles'. For a couple of moments I stared out at the Martian landscape and then I remembered my last time in desert country.

It had been about a year before and I was heading back from Vegas one sultry night with a chorus girl I'd met that weekend. She was a dancer at the Dunes' Aladdin Room and one of the wildest women I'd ever dated. It didn't take us both long to realize that what we had was just animal attraction but we had a crazy few weeks working that out. So there we were doing 70 mph on an empty stretch of road outside Barstow when the whole night was lit up by a flash that lasted almost five seconds. Everything was suddenly bright as day, brighter even. White light and harsh shadows and then a sound of distant thunder.

Carol had been almost asleep when the midnight sun struck. She grabbed my arm and screamed and then it was night again. I thought it was the end of the world. The Russians had finally done it. No four-minute warning, just BOOM! But the world hadn't ended. It was one of our own A-Bombs being detonated somewhere out in the desert. They said later, on the radio, that it was the biggest ever tested. Twenty times bigger than the Fat Boy they dropped on Hiroshima. It was only after I'd swung the automobile off the tarmac and onto the desert that I realized what the flash really was. They'd been doing them every year since the war but I must have missed the warning about this baby. I calmed Carol down without letting her know how shaky I felt. When I told her what it was she really got torn up.

“Oh my God. It was so bright, so quick. What chance would we have had if it was the real thing? It doesn't matter what you're doing, who you're with or where you are, once they start it it's all over.”

“Don't worry, it'll never happen,” I kept saying, but part of me knew I was lying. It *could* happen. Anytime. I felt helpless, insignificant. I'd felt that way before but not like this. Once, on Iwo Jima, the Navy opened up with its big guns on a ridge full of Japs just two hundred yards from where we were curled up in our fox holes. The ground shook as the shells thudded home and I felt like an ant caught in the path of a bulldozer. But though my insides were quaking I knew, without even thinking about it, that back home everything was like it had always been. People driving, shopping, eating, walking down their little neighborhood streets, just living. The Bomb though. That was different. When the time came it would be *sayonara* everything. Goodbye cruel world.

But there were no bomb tests that night as I stood in the high desert above Palm Springs, worrying about young Eddie. Images of mushroom clouds kept coming back into my head though and the Martian landscape had suddenly lost its exotic appeal. Now my surroundings just seemed eerie and desolate. I shivered. It wasn't the cold though, it was the thought that if World War Three had started right then I would have been out there on my own, alone in a dead world. It suddenly seemed real important that I should be amongst people, I needed to be part of the human race again. From where I stood, I could make out the tiny, twinkling lights of houses in the Coachella Valley. I wanted to be down there among those lights.

Chilled from the wind, I climbed back into the car. The solitude of the desert night had crept up on me and done strange things to my mind. As soon as the engine growled into life I felt more relaxed. Fifteen minutes later I was back on the highway. As I picked up speed, a Coca Cola truck came rolling alongside me and I felt strangely comforted having its lit-up silver and red bulk blocking out the desert to my right hand side. The end of the world became just a figment of a strange distant nightmare. The Coca Cola logo, the truck's shiny panels and the smell of gasoline, that was reality. I followed the Coke truck right into town. The guy drove like an idiot but I was still disappointed when he turned off before I did.

Although it was past midnight as I cruised down Palm Canyon Drive there were plenty of other automobiles on the move. Outside one restaurant, a bunch of smooth looking guys in white tuxedos and dolled-up women in cocktail dresses were piling into a line of Cadillacs with much shouting and laughter. A couple of photographers were popping flashes and everybody seemed to love the attention. Perhaps Sinatra was in town. A block south of the restaurant party, two Kim Novak look-a-likes in gold capri pants swayed from a white convertible to the entrance of the Silver Slipper Lounge Bar. For a couple of seconds I took my foot off the gas and my eyes off the road. Those babies looked good enough to

eat. I didn't stop though and putting temptation back in it's cage, I left the bars and cars of the main drag behind me and turned off into a quiet residential district. The lawns were impeccable; tall, stately palms lined the sidewalks and the streets reeked of money.

Uncle Bradley's place was at the end of a cul-de-sac with the mountains as an impressive back drop. The house was a low-roofed, sleek modern number with boulders and cacti arranged naturally all around it. It was the kind of place the Flintstones would have lived in if Fred had been a millionaire and not a dumb-ass quarry man. In fact, the whole damn neighborhood looked like a space age Bedrock with brand new Cadillacs and Lincoln Continentals in every driveway. I parked out front and walked slowly to the front door. The big windows on either side of the entrance porch had curtains drawn inside and no sign of any lights behind them. I rang the doorbell three times and waited. Nothing was stirring. If Eddie was home he was one hell of a heavy sleeper. I fished out the front-door keys Vicki had given me before I left L.A., jiggled the lock and stepped inside.

As I entered the darkness of the entrance hall, I stumbled over something lying on the floor. Catching my balance I groped for the lightswitch. As the light came on I jumped in surprise. Lying in front of me was a body. It shook me up but the shock was tempered by realising that the bulky corpse wasn't Eddie's. After a moments hesitation, I carefully stepped over the lifeless form that lay stretched out just three feet from the front door. The body was curled on it's side in the hallway, I bent down and stared into the face of death.

In this case death was an overweight, slightly balding guy in his late 40s. A dead fat man. He was wearing a crumpled shirt and tie, grey business suit, scuffed black shoes and a look of pure horror. It was the facial grimace that hit me hardest. I'd seen dead men before, too many of them. Their deaths hadn't been pretty, bodies ripped apart, arms and legs blasted away, Americans and Japs. But even among those who had died slowly, blood-soaked in agony, I hadn't seen such fear .

The house was in silence. I could see no obvious signs of violence on the man in the grey flannel suit. There was no blood anywhere and leaning over the corpse I couldn't detect any bruising to the head or neck .

I knelt by the body. From the smell of alcohol wafting up at me it seemed like the deceased had been drinking pretty heavily. I carefully removed a wallet from his jacket's inside breast pocket. Flipping it open, I checked his ID. He was one Clifford B. Rhodes, head of the Star Crest Chemical Corporation's security division. This wasn't good. For Vicki's and Eddie's sake I wanted to be in the desert again, dreaming under the starlight. But I wasn't. I was in Uncle Bradley's dream home, confused and alone with a dead man.