



The Concrete Mixer, Ray Bradbury

The Concrete Mixer

He listened to the dry-grass rustle of the old witches' voices beneath his open window:

"Ettil, the coward! Ettil, the refuser! Ettil, who will not wage the glorious war of Mars against Earth!"

"Speak on, witches!" he cried.

The voices dropped to a murmur like that of water in the long canals under the Martian sky.

"Ettil, the father of a son who must grow up in the shadow of this horrid knowledge!" said the old wrinkled women. They knocked their sly-eyed heads gently together. "Shame, shame!"

His wife was crying on the other side of the room. Her tears were as rain, numerous and cool on the tiles.

"Oh, Ettil, how can you think this way?"

Ettil laid aside his metal book which, at his beckoning, had been singing him a story all morning from its thin golden-wired frame.

"I've tried to explain," he said. "This is a foolish thing, Mars invading Earth. We'll be destroyed, utterly."

Outside, a banging, crashing boom, a surge of brass, a drum, a cry, marching feet, pennants and songs. Through the stone sheets the army, fire weapons to shoulder, stamped. Children skipped after. Old women waved dirty flags.

"I shall remain on Mars and read a book," said Ettil.

A blunt knock on the door.

Tylla answered. Father-in-law stormed in.

"What's this I hear about my son-in-law? A traitor?"

"Yes, Father."

"You're not fighting in the Martian Army?"

"No, Father."

"Gods!" The old father turned very red. "A plague on your name! You'll be shot."

"Shoot me, then, and have it over."

"Who ever heard of a Martian not invading? Who!"

"Nobody. It is, I admit, quite incredible."

"Incredible," husked the witch voices under the window.

"Father, can't you reason with him?" demanded Tylla.

"Reason with a dung heap," cried Father, eyes blazing.

He came and stood over Etil.

"Bands playing, a fine day, women weeping, children jumping, everything right, men marching bravely, and you sit here! Oh, shame!"

"Shame," sobbed the faraway voices in the hedge.

"Get the devil out of my house with your inane chatter," said Etil, exploding.

"Take your medals and your drums and run!"

He shoved Father-in-law past a screaming wife, only to have the door thrown wide at this moment, as a military detail entered.

A voice shouted, "Etil Vrye?"

"Yes!"

"You are under arrest!"

"Good-bye, my dear wife. I am off to the wars with these fools!" shouted Etil, dragged through the door by the men in bronze mesh.

"Good-bye, good-bye," said the town witches, fading away....

The cell was neat and clean. Without a book, Etil was nervous. He gripped the bars and watched the rockets shoot up into the night air. The stars were cold and numerous; they seemed to scatter when every rocket blasted up among them.

"Fools," whispered Etil. "Fools!"

The cell door opened. One man with a kind of vehicle entered, full of books; books here, there, everywhere in the chambers of the vehicle. Behind him the Military Assignor loomed.

"Etil Vrye, we want to know why you had these illegal Earth books in your house. These copies of Wonder Stories, Scientific Tales, Fantastic Stories. Explain."

The man gripped Etil's wrist.

Etil shook him free. "If you're going to shoot me, shoot me. That literature, from Earth, is the very reason why I won't try to invade them. It's the reason why your invasion will fail."

"How so?" The assignor scowled and turned to the yellowed magazines.

"Pick any copy," said Etil. "Any one at all. Nine out of ten stories in the years 1929, '30 to '50, Earth calendar, have every Martian invasion successfully invading Earth."

"Ah!" The assignor smiled, nodded.

"And then," said Etil, "failing."

"That's treason! Owning such literature!"

"So be it, if you wish. But let me draw a few conclusions. Invariably, each invasion is thwarted by a young man, usually lean, usually Irish, usually alone, named Mick or Rick or Jick or Bannon, who destroys the Martians."

"You don't believe that!"

"No, I don't believe Earthmen can actually do that - no. But they have a background, understand, Assignor, of generations of children reading just such fiction, absorbing it. They have nothing but a literature of invasions successfully thwarted. Can you say the same for Martian literature?"

"Well..."

"No."

"I guess not."

"You know not. We never wrote stories of such a fantastic nature. Now we rebel, we attack, and we shall die."

"I don't see your reasoning on that. Where does this tie in with the magazine stories?"

"Morale. A big thing. The Earthmen know they can't fail. It is in them like blood beating in their veins. They cannot fail. They will repel each invasion, no matter how well organized. Their youth of reading just such fiction as this has given them a faith we cannot equal. We Martians? We are uncertain; we know that we might fail. Our morale is low, in spite of the banged drums and tooted horns."

"I won't listen to this treason," cried the assignor. "This fiction will be burned, as you will be, within the next ten minutes. You have a choice, Etil Vrye. Join the Legion of War, or burn."

"It is a choice of deaths. I choose to burn."

"Men!"

He was hustled out into the courtyard. There he saw his carefully hoarded reading matter set to the torch. A special pit was prepared, with oil five feet deep in it. This, with a great thunder, was set afire. Into this, in a minute, he would be pushed.

On the far side of the courtyard, in shadow, he noticed the solemn figure of his son standing alone, his great yellow eyes luminous with sorrow and fear. He did not put out his hand or speak, but only looked at his father like some dying animal, a wordless animal seeking rescue.

Etil looked at the flaming pit. He felt the rough hands seize him, strip him, push him forward to the hot perimeter of death.

Only then did Etil swallow and cry out, "Wait!"

The assignor's face, bright with the orange fire, pushed forward in the trembling air.

"What is it?"

"I will join the Legion of War," replied Etil.

"Good! Release him!"

The hands fell away.

As he turned he saw his son standing far across the court, waiting. His son was not smiling, only waiting. In the sky a bronze rocket leaped across the stars, ablaze....

"And now we bid good-bye to these stalwart warriors," said the assignor.

The band thumped and the wind blew a fine sweet rain of tears gently upon the sweating army. The children cavorted. In the chaos Etil saw his wife weeping with pride, his son solemn and silent at her side.

They marched into the ship, everybody laughing and brave. They buckled themselves into their spiderwebs. All through the tense ship the spiderwebs were filled with lounging, lazy men. They chewed on bits of food and waited. A great lid slammed shut. A valve hissed.

"Off to Earth and destruction," whispered Etil.

"What?" asked someone.

"Off to glorious victory," said Etil, grimacing.

The rocket jumped.

Space, thought Etil. Here we are banging across black inks and pink lights of space in a brass kettle. Here we are, a celebratory rocket heaved out to fill the Earthmen's eyes with fear flames as they look up to the sky. What is it like, being far, far away from your home, your wife, your child, here and now? He tried to analyze his trembling.

It was like tying your most secret inward working organs to Mars and then jumping out a million miles. Your heart was still on Mars, pumping, glowing. Your brain was still on Mars, thinking, crenulated, like an abandoned torch.

Your stomach was still on Mars, somnolent, trying to digest the final dinner. Your lungs were still in the cool blue wine air of Mars, a soft folded bellows screaming for release, one part of you longing for the rest.

For here you were, a meshless, cogless automaton, a body upon which officials had performed clinical autopsy and left all of you that counted back upon the empty seas and strewn over the darkened hills. Here you were, bottle-empty, fireless, chill, with only your hands to give death to Earthmen. A pair of hands is all you are now, he thought in cold remoteness.

Here you lie in the tremendous web. Others are about you, but they are whole - whole hearts and bodies. But all of you that lives is back there walking the desolate seas in evening winds. This thing here, this cold clay thing, is already dead.

"Attack stations, attack stations, attack!"

"Ready, ready, ready!"

"Up!"

"Out of the webs, quick!"

Ettil moved. Somewhere before him his two cold hands moved.

How swift it has all been, he thought. A year ago one Earth rocket reached Mars. Our scientists, with their incredible telepathic ability, copied it; our workers, with their incredible plants, reproduced it a hundredfold. No other Earth ship has reached Mars since then, and yet we know their language perfectly, all of us. We know their culture, their logic. And we shall pay the price of our brilliance.

"Guns on the ready!"

"Right!"

"Sights!"

"Reading by miles?"

"Ten thousand!"

"Attack!"

A humming silence. A silence of insects throbbing in the walls of the rocket. The insect singing of tiny bobbins and levers and whirls of wheels. Silence of waiting men. Silence of glands emitting the slow steady pulse of sweat under arm, on brow, under staring pale eyes!

"Wait! Ready!"

Ettil hung onto his sanity with his fingernails, hung hard and long. Silence, silence, silence. Waiting.

Teeee-e-ee!

"What's that?"

"Earth radio!"

"Cut them in!"

"They're trying to reach us, call us. Cut them in!"

Eee-e-e!

"Here they are! Listen!"

"Calling Martian invasion fleet!"

The listening silence, the insect hum pulling back to let the sharp Earth voice crack in upon the rooms of waiting men.

"This is Earth calling. This is William Sommers, president of the Association of United American Producers!"

Ettil held tight to his station, bent forward, eyes shut.

"Welcome to Earth."

"What?" the men in the rocket roared. "What did he say?"

"Yes, welcome to Earth."

"It's a trick!"

Ettil shivered, opened his eyes to stare in bewilderment at the unseen voice from the ceiling source.

"Welcome! Welcome to green, industrial Earth!" declared the friendly voice. "With open arms we welcome you, to turn a bloody invasion into a time of friendships that will last through all of Time."

"A trick!"

"Hush, listen!"

"Many years ago we of Earth renounced war, destroyed our atom bombs. Now, unprepared as we are, there is nothing for us but to welcome you. The planet is yours. We ask only mercy from you good and merciful invaders."

"It can't be true!" a voice whispered.

"It must be a trick!"

"Land and be welcomed, all of you," said Mr. William Sommers of Earth. "Land anywhere. Earth is yours; we are all brothers!"

Ettil began to laugh. Everyone in the room turned to see him. The other Martians blinked. "He's gone mad!"

He did not stop laughing until they hit him.

The tiny fat man in the center of the hot rocket tarmac at Green Town, California, jerked out a clean white handkerchief and touched it to his wet brow. He squinted blindly from the fresh plank platform at the fifty thousand people restrained behind a fence of policemen, arm to arm. Everybody looked at the sky.

"There they are!"

A gasp.

"No, just sea gulls!"

A disappointed grumble.

"I'm beginning to think it would have been better to have declared war on them," whispered the mayor. "Then we could all go home."

"Sh-h!" said his wife.

"There!" The crowd roared.

Out of the sun came the Martian rockets.

"Everybody ready?" The mayor glanced nervously about.

"Yes, sir," said Miss California 1965.

"Yes," said Miss America 1940, who had come rushing up at the last minute as a substitute for Miss America 1966, who was ill at home. "Yes siree," said Mr. Biggest Grapefruit in San Fernando Valley 1956, eagerly.

"Ready, band?"

The band poised its brass like so many guns.

"Ready!"

The rockets landed. "Go!"

The band played "California, Here I Come" ten times. From noon until one o'clock the mayor made a speech, shaking his hands in the direction of the silent, apprehensive rockets.

At one-fifteen the seals of the rockets opened

The band played "Oh, You Golden State" three times.

Ettil and fifty other Martians leaped out, guns at the ready.

The mayor ran forward with the key to Earth in his hands.

The band played "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town," and a full chorus of singers imported from Long Beach sang different words to it, something about "Martians Are Coming to Town."

Seeing no weapons about, the Martians relaxed, but kept their guns out.

From one-thirty until two-fifteen the mayor made the same speech over for the benefit of the Martians.

At two-thirty Miss America of 1940 volunteered to kiss all the Martians if they lined up.

At two-thirty and ten seconds the band played "How Do You Do, Everybody," to cover up the confusion caused by Miss America's suggestion.

At two thirty-five Mr. Biggest Grapefruit presented the Martians with a two-ton truck full of grapefruit.

At two thirty-seven the mayor gave them all free passes to the Elite and Majestic theaters, combining this gesture with another speech which lasted until after three.

The band played, and the fifty thousand people sang, "For They Are Jolly Good Fellows."

It was over at four o'clock.

Ettil sat down in the shadow of the rocket, two of his fellows with him. "So this is Earth!"

"I say kill the filthy rats," said one Martian. "I don't trust them. They're sneaky. What's their motive for treating us this way?" He held up a box of something that rustled. "What's this stuff they gave me? A sample, they said."

He read the label. BLIX, the new sudsy soap.

The crowd had drifted about, was mingling with the Martians like a carnival throng. Everywhere was the buzzing murmur of people fingering the rockets, asking questions.

Ettil was cold. He was beginning to tremble even more now.

"Don't you feel it?" he whispered. "The tenseness, the evilness of all this. Something's going to happen to us. They have some plan. Something subtle and horrible. They're going to do something to us - I know."

"I say kill every one of them!"

"How can you kill people who call you 'pal' and 'buddy'?" asked another Martian.

Ettil shook his head. "They're sincere. And yet I feel as if we were in a big acid vat melting away, away. I'm frightened."

He put his mind out to touch among the crowd. "Yes, they're really friendly, hail-fellows-we'll-met (one of their terms). One huge mass of common men, loving dogs and cats and Martians equally. And yet - and yet..."

The band played "Roll Out the Barrel." Free beer was being distributed through the courtesy of Hagenback Beer, Fresno, California.
The sickness came.

The men poured out fountains of slush from their mouths. The sound of sickness filled the land.
Gagging, Etil sat beneath a sycamore tree.

"A plot, a plot - a horrible plot," he groaned, holding his stomach.
"What did you eat?" The assignor stood over him.
"Something that they called popcorn," groaned Etil.
"And?"

"And some sort of long meat on a bun, and some yellow liquid in an iced vat, and some sort of fish and something called pastrami," sighed Etil, eyelids flickering.
The moans of the Martian invaders sounded all about.

"Kill the plotting snakes!" somebody cried weakly.
"Hold on," said the assignor. "It's merely hospitality. They overdid it. Up on your feet now, men. Into the town. We've got to place small garrisons of men about to make sure all is well. Other ships are landing in other cities. We've our job to do here."

The men gained their feet and stood blinking stupidly about.
"Forward, march!"
One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four!...

The white stores of the little town lay dreaming in shimmering heat. Heat emanated from everything - poles, concrete, metal, awnings, roofs, tar paper - everything.
The sound of Martian feet sounded on the asphalt.

"Careful, men!" whispered the assignor. They walked past a beauty shop.
From inside, a furtive giggle. "Look!"

A coppery head bobbed and vanished like a doll in the window. A blue eye glinted and winked at a keyhole.

"It's a plot," whispered Etil. "A plot, I tell you!"

The odors of perfume were fanned out on the summer air by the whirling vents of the grottoes where the women hid like undersea creatures, under electric cones, their hair curled into wild whorls and peaks, their eyes shrewd and glassy, animal and sly, their mouths painted a neon red. Fans were whirring, the perfumed wind issuing upon the stillness, moving among green trees, creeping among the amazed Martians.

"For God's sake!" screamed Etil, his nerves suddenly breaking loose.

"Let's get in our rockets - go home! They'll get us! Those horrid things in there. See them? Those evil undersea things, those women in their cool little caverns of artificial rock!"

"Shut up!"

Look at them in there, he thought, drifting their dresses like cool green gills over their pillar legs. He shouted.

"Someone shut his mouth!"

"They'll rush out on us, hurling chocolate boxes and copies of Kleig Love and Holly Pick-ture, shrieking with their red greasy mouths! Inundate us with banality, destroy our sensibilities! Look at them, being electrocuted by devices, their voices like hums and chants and murmurs! Do you dare go in there?"

"Why not?" asked the other Martians.

"They'll fry you, bleach you, change you! Crack you, flake you away until you're nothing but a husband, a working man, the one with the money who pays so they can come sit in there devouring their evil chocolates! Do you think you could control them?"

"Yes, by the gods!"

From a distance a voice drifted, a high and shrill voice, a woman's voice saying, "Ain't that middle one there cute?"

"Martians ain't so bad after all. Gee, they're just men," said another, fading. "Hey, there. Yoo-hoo! Martians! Hey!"
Yelling, Etil ran....

He sat in a park and trembled steadily. He remembered what he had seen. Looking up at the dark night sky, he felt so far from home, so deserted. Even now, as he sat among the still trees, in the distance he could see Martian warriors walking the streets with the Earth women, vanishing into the phantom darkneses of the little emotion palaces to hear the ghastly sounds of white things moving on gray screens, with little frizz-haired women beside them, wads of gelatinous gum working in their jaws, other wads under the seats, hardening with the fossil imprints of the women's tiny cat teeth forever imbedded therein. The cave of winds - the cinema.

"Hello."

He jerked his head in terror.

A woman sat on the bench beside him, chewing gum lazily.

"Don't run off; I don't bite," she said.

"Oh," he said.

"Like to go to the pictures?" she said.

"No."

"Aw, come on," she said. "Everybody else is."

"No," he said. "Is that all you do in this world?"

"All? Ain't that enough?" Her blue eyes widened suspiciously. "What you want me to do - sit home, read a book? Ha, ha! That's rich."

Etil stared at her a moment before asking a question.

"Do you do anything else?" he asked.

"Ride in cars. You got a car? You oughta get you a big new convertible Podler Six. Gee, they're fancy! Any man with a Podler Six can go out with any gal, you bet!" she said, blinking at him. "I bet you got all kinds of money - you come from Mars and all. I bet if you really wanted you could get a Podler Six and travel everywhere."

"To the show maybe?"

"What's wrong with 'at?"

"Nothing - nothing."

"You know what you talk like, mister?" she said. "A Communist! Yes, sir, that's the kinda talk nobody stands for, by gosh. Nothing wrong with our little old system. We was good enough to let you Martians invade, and we never raised even our bitty finger, did we?"

"That's what I've been trying to understand," said Etil. "Why did you let us?"

"'Cause we're bighearted, mister; that's why! Just remember that, bighearted."

She walked off to look for someone else.

Gathering courage to himself, Etil began to write a letter to his wife, moving the pen carefully over the paper on his knee.

"Dear Tylla..."

But again he was interrupted. A small-little-girl-of-an-old-woman, with a pale round wrinkled little face, shook her tambourine in front of his nose, forcing him to glance up.

"Brother," she cried, eyes blazing. "Have you been saved?"

"Am I in danger?" Etil dropped his pen, jumping.

"Terrible danger!" she wailed, clanking her tambourine, gazing at the sky. "You need to be saved, brother, in the worst way!"

"I'm inclined to agree," he said, trembling.

"We saved lots already today. I saved three myself, of you Mars people. Ain't that nice?" She grinned at him.

"I guess so."

She was acutely suspicious. She leaned forward with her secret whisper.

"Brother," she wanted to know, "you been baptized?"

"I don't know," he whispered back.

"You don't know?" she cried, flinging up hand and tambourine.
"Is it like being shot?" he asked.

"Brother," she said, "you are in a bad and sinful condition. I blame it on your ignorant bringing up. I bet those schools on Mars are terrible - don't teach you no truth at all. Just a pack of made-up lies. Brother, you got to be baptized if you want to be happy."

"Will it make me happy even in this world here?" he said.

"Don't ask for everything on your platter," she said. "Be satisfied with a wrinkled pea, for there's another world we're all going to that's better than this one."

"I know that world," he said.

"It's peaceful," she said.

"Yes."

"There's quiet," she said.

"Yes."

"There's milk and honey flowing."

"Why, yes," he said.

"And everybody's laughing."

"I can see it now," he said.

"A better world," she said.

"Far better," he said. "Yes, Mars is a great planet."

"Mister," she said, tightening up and almost flinging the tambourine in his face, "you been joking with me?"

"Why, no." He was embarrassed and bewildered. "I thought you were talking about..."

"Not about mean old nasty Mars, I tell you, mister! It's your type that is going to boil for years, and suffer and break out in black pimples and be tortured..."

"I must admit Earth isn't very nice. You've described it beautifully."

"Mister, you're funning me again!" she cried angrily.

"No, no - please. I plead ignorance."

"Well," she said, "you're a heathen, and heathens are improper. Here's a paper. Come to this address tomorrow night and be baptized and be happy. We shouts and we stomps and we talk in voices, so if you want to hear our all-cornet, all-brass band, you come, won't you now?"

"I'll try," he said hesitantly.

Down the street she went, patting her tambourine, singing at the top of her voice, "Happy Am I, I'm Always Happy."

Dazed, Etil returned to his letter.

"Dear Tylla: To think that in my naivete I imagined that the Earthmen would have to counterattack with guns and bombs. No, no. I was sadly wrong. There is no Rick or Mick or Jick or Bannon - those lever fellows who save worlds.

No. There are blond robots with pink rubber bodies, real, but somehow unreal, alive but somehow automatic in all responses, living in caves all of their lives. Their derrieres are incredible in girth. Their eyes are fixed and motionless from an endless time of staring at picture screens.

The only muscles they have occur in their jaws from their ceaseless chewing of gum. And it is not only these, my dear Tylla, but the entire civilization into which we have been dropped like a shovelful of seeds into a large concrete mixer. Nothing of us will survive. We will be killed not by the gun but by the glad-hand. We will be destroyed not by the rocket but by the automobile..."

Somebody screamed. A crash, another crash. Silence.

Etil leaped up from his letter. Outside, on the street two ears had crashed. One full of Martians, another with Earthmen.

Etil returned to his letter:

"Dear, dear Tylla, a few statistics if you will allow. Forty-five thousand people illed every year on this continent of America; made into jelly right in the can, as it were, in the automobiles. Red blood jelly, with

white marrow bones like sudden thoughts, ridiculous horror thoughts, transfixed in the immutable jelly. The cars roll up in tight neat sardine rolls - all sauce, all silence.

Blood manure for green buzzing summer flies, all over the highways. Faces made into Halloween masks by sudden stops. Halloween is one of their holidays. I think they worship the automobile on that night - something to do with death, anyway.

You look out your window and see two people lying atop each other in friendly fashion who, a moment ago, had never met before, dead. I foresee our army mashed, diseased, trapped in cinemas by witches and gum. Sometime in the next day I shall try to escape back to Mars before it is too late.

Somewhere on Earth tonight, my Tylla, there is a Man with a Lever, which, when he pulls it, Will Save the World. The man is now unemployed. His switch gathers dust. He himself plays pinochle.

The women of this evil planet are drowning us in a tide of banal sentimentality, misplaced romance, and one last fling before the makers of glycerin boil them down for usage. Good night, Tylla. Wish me well, for I shall probably die trying to escape.

My love to our child."

Weeping silently, he folded the letter and reminded himself to mail it later at the rocket post.

He left the park. What was there to do? Escape? But how? Return to the post late tonight, steal one of the rockets alone and go back to Mars? Would it be possible? He shook his head. He was much too confused.

All that he really knew was that if he stayed here he would soon be the property of a lot of things that buzzed and snorted and hissed, that gave off fumes or stenches. In six months he would be the owner of a large pink, trained ulcer, a blood pressure of algebraic dimensions, a

myopia this side of blindness, and nightmares as deep as oceans and infested with improbable lengths of dream intestines through which he must violently force his way each night. No, no.

He looked at the haunted faces of the Earthmen drifting violently along in their mechanical death boxes. Soon - yes, very soon - they would invent an auto with six silver handles on it!

"Hey, there!"

An auto horn. A large long hearse of a car, black and ominous pulled to the curb. A man leaned out.

"You a Martian?"

"Yes."

"Just the man I gotta see. Hop in quick - the chance of a lifetime. Hop in. Take you to a real nice joint where we can talk. Come on - don't stand there."

As if hypnotized, Etil opened the door of the car, got in.

They drove off.

"What'll it be, E.V.? How about a manhattan? Two manhattans, waiter. Okay, E.V. This is my treat. This is on me and Big Studios! Don't even touch your wallet. Pleased to meet you, E.V. My name's R. R. Van Plank. Maybe you hearda me? No? Well, shake anyhow."

Etil felt his hand massaged and dropped. They were in a dark hole with music and waiters drifting about. Two drinks were set down. It had all happened so swiftly. Now Van Plank, hands crossed on his chest, was surveying his Martian discovery.

"What I want you for, E.V., is this. It's the most magnanimous idea I ever got in my life. I don't know how it came to me, just in a flash. I was sitting home tonight and I thought to myself, My God, what a picture it would make! Invasion of Earth by Mars. So what I got to do? I got to find an adviser for the film. So I climbed in my car and found you and here we are. Drink up! Here's to your health and our future. Skoal!"

"But..." said Etil.

"Now, I know, you'll want money. Well, we got plenty of that. Besides, I got a li'l black book full of peaches I can lend you."

"I don't like most of your Earth fruit and..."

"You're a card, mac, really. Well, here's how I get the picture in my mind - listen." He leaned forward excitedly. "We got a flash scene of the Martians at a big powwow, drummin' drums, gettin' stewed on Mars. In the background are huge silver cities..."

"But that's not the way Martian cities are..."

"We got to have color, kid. Color. Let your pappy fix this. Anyway, there are all the Martians doing a dance around a fire..."

"We don't dance around fires..."

"In this film you got a fire and you dance," declared Van Plank, eyes shut, proud of his certainty. He nodded, dreaming it over on his tongue. "Then we got a beautiful Martian woman, tall and blond."

"Martian women are dark..."

"Look, I don't see how we're going to be happy, E.V. By the way, son, you ought to change your name. What was it again?"

"Etil."

"That's a woman's name. I'll give you a better one. Call you Joe. Okay, Joe. As I was saying, our Martian women are gonna be blond, because, see, just because. Or else your poppa won't be happy. You got any suggestions?"

"I thought that..."

"And another thing we gotta have is a scene, very tearful, where the Martian woman saves the whole ship of Martian men from dying when a meteor or something hits the ship. That'll make a whackeroo of a scene. You know, I'm glad I found you, Joe. You're going to have a good deal with us, I tell you."

Ettil reached out and held the man's wrist tight. "Just a minute. There's something I want to ask you."

"Sure, Joe, shoot."

"Why are you being so nice to us? We invade your planet, and you welcome us – everybody - like long-lost children. Why?"

"They sure grow 'em green on Mars, don't they? You're a naive-type guy - I can see from way over here. Mac, look at it this way. We're all Little People, ain't we?"

He waved a small tan hand garnished with emeralds.

"We're all common as dirt, ain't we? Well, here on Earth, we're proud of that.

This is the century of the Common Man, Bill, and we're proud we're small. Billy, you're looking at a planet full of Saroyans. Yes, sir. A great big fat family of friendly Saroyans - everybody lving everybody. We understand you Martians, Joe, and we know why you invaded Earth. We know how lonely you were up on that little cold planet Mars, how you envied us our cities..."

"Our civilization is much older than yours..."

"Please, Joe, you make me unhappy when you interrupt. Let me finish my theory and then you talk all you want. As I was saying, you was lonely up there, and down you came to see our cities and our women and all, and we welcomed you in, because you're our brothers, Common Men like all of us.

And then, as a kind of side incident, Roscoe, there's a certain little small profit to be made from this invasion. I mean for instance this picture I plan, which will net us, neat, a billion dollars, I bet.

Next week we start putting out a special Martian doll at thirty bucks a throw. Think of the millions there. I also got a contract to make a Martian game to sell for five bucks. There's all sorts of angles."

"I see," said Etil, drawing back.

"And then of course there's that whole nice new market. Think of all the depilatories and gum and shoeshine we can sell to you Martians."

"Wait. Another question."

"Shoot."

"What's your first name? What's the R.R. stand for?"

"Richard Robert."

Etil looked at the ceiling. "Do they sometimes, perhaps, on occasion, once in a while, by accident, call you - Rick?"

"How'd you guess, mac? Rick, sure."

Etil sighed and began to laugh and laugh. He put out his hand.

"So you're Rick? Rick! So you're Rick!"

"What's the joke, laughing boy? Let Poppa in!"

"You wouldn't understand - a private joke. Ha, ha!"

Tears ran down his cheeks and into his open mouth. He pounded the table again and again.

"So you're Rick. Oh, how different, how funny. No bulging muscles, no lean jaw, no gun. Only a wallet full of money and an emerald ring and a big middle!"

"Hey, watch the language! I may not be no Apollo, but..."

"Shake hands, Rick. I've wanted to meet you. You're the man who'll conquer Mars, with cocktail shakers and foot arches and poker chips and riding crops and leather boots and checkered caps and rum collinses."

"I'm only a humble businessman," said Van Plank, eyes slyly down. "I do my work and take my humble little piece of money pie. But, as I was saying, Mort, I been thinking of the market on Mars for Uncle Wiggily games and Dick Tracy comics; all new."

A big wide field never even heard of cartoons, right? Right! So we just toss a great big bunch of stuff on the Martians' heads. They'll fight for it, kid, fight! Who wouldn't, for perfumes and Paris dresses and Oshkosh overalls, eh? And nice new shoes..."

"We don't wear shoes."

"What have I got here?" R.R. asked of the ceiling. "A planet full of Okies? Look, Joe, we'll take care of that. We'll shame everyone into wearing shoes. Then we sell them the polish!"

"Oh."

He slapped Etil's arm. "Is it a deal? Will you be technical director on my film? You'll get two hundred a week to start, a five hundred top. What you say?"

"I'm sick," said Etil. He had drunk the manhattan and was now turning blue.

"Say, I'm sorry. I didn't know it would do that to you. Let's get some fresh air."

In the open air Etil felt better. He swayed. "So that's why Earth took us in?"

"Sure, son. Any time an Earthman can turn an honest dollar, watch him steam. The customer is always right. No hard feelings. Here's my card. Be at the studio in Hollywood tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. They'll show you your office. I'll arrive at eleven and see you then. Be sure you get there at nine o'clock. It's a strict rule."

"Why?"

"Gallagher, you're a queer oyster, but I love you. Good night. Happy invasion!"

The car drove off.

Etil blinked after it, incredulous. Then, rubbing his brow with the palm of his hand, he walked slowly along the street toward the rocket port.

"Well, what are you going to do?" he asked himself, aloud.

The rockets lay gleaming in the moonlight silent. From the city came the sounds of distant revelry. In the medical compound an extreme case of nervous breakdown was being tended to: a young Martian who, by his screams, had seen too much, drunk too much, heard too many songs on the little red-and-yellow boxes in the drinking places, and had been chased around innumerable tables by a large elephant-like woman.

He kept murmuring: "Can't breathe... crushed, trapped."

The sobbing faded. Etil came out of the shadows and moved on across a wide avenue toward the ships. Far over, he could see the guards lying about drunkenly. He listened. From the vast city came the faint sounds of cars and music and sirens.

And he imagined other sounds too: the insidious whir of malt machines stirring malts to fatten the warriors and make them lazy and forgetful, the narcotic voices of the cinema caverns lulling and lulling the Martians fast, fast into a slumber through which, all of their remaining lives, they would sleepwalk.

A year from now, how many Martians dead of cirrhosis of the liver, bad kidneys, high blood pressure, suicide?

He stood in the middle of the empty avenue. Two blocks away a car was rushing toward him.

He had a choice: stay here, take the studio job, report for work each morning as adviser on a picture, and, in time, come to agree with the producer that, yes indeed, there were massacres on Mars; yes, the women were tall and blond; yes, there were tribal dances and sacrifices; yes, yes, yes. Or he could walk over and get into a rocket ship and, alone, return to Mars.

"But what about next year?" he said.

The Blue Canal Night Club brought to Mars. The Ancient City Gambling Casino, Built Right Inside. Yes, Right Inside a Real Martian Ancient City!

Neons, racing forms blowing in the old cities, picnic lunches in the ancestral graveyards – all of it, all of it.

But not quite yet. In a few days he could be home. Tylla would be waiting with their son, and then for the last few years of gentle life he might sit with his wife in the blowing weather on the edge of the canal reading his good, gentle books, sipping a rare and light wine, talking and living out their short time until the neon bewilderment fell from the sky.

And then perhaps he and Tylla might move into the blue mountains and hide for another year or two until the tourists came to snap their cameras and say how quaint things were.

He knew just what he would say to Tylla. "War is a bad thing, but peace can be a living horror."

He stood in the middle of the wide avenue.

Turning, it was with no surprise that he saw a car bearing down upon him, a car full of screaming children. These boys and girls, none older than sixteen, were swerving and ricocheting their open-top car down the avenue. He saw them point at him and yell. He heard the motor roar louder. The car sped forward at sixty miles an hour.

He began to run.

Yes, yes, he thought tiredly, with the car upon him, how strange, how sad. It sounds so much like... a concrete mixer.

The end