



# The Off Season, Ray Bradbury

## The Off Season

Sam Parkhill motioned with the broom, sweeping away the blue Martian sand.

'Here we are,' he said. 'Yes, sir, look at that!' He pointed. 'Look at that sign. SAM'S HOT DOGS! Ain't that beautiful, Elma?'

'Sure, Sam,' said his wife.

'Boy, what a change for me. If the boys from the Fourth Expedition could see me now. Am I glad to be in business myself while all the rest of them guys're off soldiering around still. We'll make thousands, Elma, thousands.'

His wife looked at him for a long time, not speaking. 'Whatever happened to Captain Wilder?' she asked finally. 'That captain that killed that guy who thought he was going to kill off every other Earth Man, what was his name?'

'Spender, that nut. He was too damn particular. Oh, Captain Wilder? He's off on a rocket to Jupiter, I hear. They kicked him upstairs. I think he was a little batty abouts Mars too. Touchy, you know. He'll be back down from Jupiter and Pluto in about twenty years if he's lucky. That's what he gets for shooting off his mouth. And while he's freezing to death, look at me, look at this place!'

This was a crossroads where two dead highways came and went in darkness. Here Sam Parkhill had flung up this riveted aluminum structure, garish with white light, trembling with juke-box melody.

He stooped to fix a border of broken glass he had placed on the footpath. He had broken the glass from some old Martian buildings in the hills. 'Best hot dogs on two worlds! First man on Mars with a hot-dog stand!'

The best onions and chili and mustard! You can't say I'm not alert. Here's the main highways, over there is the dead city and the mineral deposits. Those trucks from Earth Settlement 101 will have to pass here twenty-four hours a day! Do I know my locations, or don't I?'

His wife looked at her fingernails.

'You think those ten thousand new-type work rockets will come through to Mars?' she said at last.

'In a month,' he said loudly. 'Why you look so funny?'

'I don't trust those Earth people,' she said. 'I'll believe it when I see them ten thousand rockets arrive with the one hundred thousand Mexicans and Chinese on them.'

'Customers.' He lingered on the word. 'One hundred thousand hungry people.'

'If,' said his wife slowly, watching the sky, 'there's no atomic war. I don't trust no atom bombs. There's so many of them on Earth now, you never can tell.'

'Ah,' said Sam, and went on sweeping.

From the corners of his eyes he caught a blue flicker. Something floated in the air gently behind him. He heard his wife say, 'Sam. A friend of yours to see you.'

Sam whirled to see the mask seemingly floating in the wind.

'So you're back again!' And Sam held his broom like a weapon.

The mask nodded. It was cut from pale blue glass and was fitted above a thin neck, under which were blowing loose robes of thin yellow silk. From the silk two mesh silver hands appeared. The mask mouth was a slot from which musical sounds issued now as the robes, the mask, the hands increased to a height, decreased.

'Mr Parkhill, I've come back to speak to you again,' the voice said from behind the mask.

'I thought I told you I don't want you near here!' cried Sam. 'Go on, I'll give you the Disease!'

'I've already had the Disease,' said the voice. 'I was one of the few survivors. I was sick a long time.'

'Go on and hide in the hills, that's where you belong, that's where you've been. Why you come on down and bother me? Now, all of a sudden. Twice in one day.'

'We mean you no harm.'

'But I mean you harm!' said Sam, backing up. 'I don't like strangers. I don't like Martians. I never seen one before. It ain't natural. All these years you guys hide, and all of a sudden you pick on me. Leave me alone.'

'We come for an important reason,' said the blue mask.

'If it's about this land, it's mine. I built this hot-dog stand with my own hands.'

'In a way it is about the land.'

'Look here,' said Sam. 'I'm from New York City. Where I come from there's ten million others just like me. You Martians are a couple dozen left, got no cities, you wander around in the hills, no leaders, no laws, and now you come tell me about this land. Well, the old got to give way to the new. That's the law of give and take. I got a gun here. After you left this morning I got it out and loaded it.'

'We Martians are telepathic,' said the cold blue mask. 'We are in contact with one of your towns across the dead sea. Have you listened on your radio?'

'My radio's busted.'

'Then you don't know. There's big news. It concerns Earth—'

A silver hand gestured. A bronze tube appeared in it.

'Let me show you this.'

'A gun,' cried Sam Parkhill.

An instant later he had yanked his own gun from his hip holster and fired into the mist, the robe, the blue mask.

The mask sustained itself a moment. Then, like a small circus tent pulling up its stakes and dropping soft fold on fold, the silks rustled, the mask descended, the silver claws tinkled on the stone path. The mask lay on a small huddle of silent white bones and material.

Sam stood gasping.

His wife swayed over the huddled pile.

‘That’s no weapon,’ she said, bending down. She picked up the bronze tube. ‘He was going to show you a message. It’s all written out in snakescript, all the blue snakes. I can’t read it. Can you?’

‘No, that Martian picture writing, it wasn’t anything. Let it go!’ Sam glanced hastily around. ‘There may be others! We’ve got to get him out of sight. Get the shovel!’

‘What’re you going to do?’

‘Bury him, of course!’

‘You shouldn’t have shot him.’

‘It was a mistake. Quick!’

Silently she fetched him the shovel.

At eight o’clock he was back sweeping the front of the hot-dog stand self-consciously. His wife stood, arms folded, in the bright doorway.

‘I’m sorry what happened,’ he said. He looked at her, then away. ‘You know it was purely the circumstances of Fate.’

‘Yes,’ said his wife.

‘I hated like hell to see him take out that weapon.’

‘What weapon?’

‘Well, I thought it was one! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! How many times do I say it!’

‘Ssh,’ said Elma, putting one finger to her lips. ‘Ssh.’

'I don't care,' he said. 'I got the whole Earth Settlements. Inc., back of me!' He snorted. 'These Martians won't dare—'  
'Look,' said Elma.

He looked out onto the dead sea bottom. He dropped his broom. He picked it up and his mouth was open, a little free drop of saliva flew on the air, and he was suddenly shivering.  
'Elma, Elma, Elma!' he said.

'Here they come,' said Elma.  
Across the ancient sea floor a dozen tall, blue-sailed Martian sand ships floated, like blue ghosts, like blue smoke.  
'Sand ships! But there aren't any more, Elma, no more sand ships.'

'Those seem to be sand ships,' she said.

'But the authorities confiscated all of them! They broke them up, sold some at auction! I'm the only one in this whole damn territory's got one and knows how to run one.'  
'Not any more,' she said, nodding at the sea.

'Come on, let's get out of here!'  
'Why?' she asked slowly, fascinated with the Martian vessels.  
'They'll kill me! Get in our truck, quick!'  
Elma didn't move.

He had to drag her around back of the stand where the two machines stood, his truck, which he had used steadily until a month ago, and the old Martian sand ship which he had bid for at auction, smiling, and which, during the last three weeks, he had used to carry supplies back and forth over the glassy sea floor. He looked at his truck now and remembered. The engine was out on the ground; he had been pattering with it for two days.

'The truck don't seem to be in running condition,' said Elma.  
'The sand ship. Get in!'

‘And let you drive me in a sand ship? Oh no.’

‘Get in! I can do it!’

He shoved her in, jumped in behind her, and flapped the tiller, let the cobalt sail up to take the evening wind.

The stars were bright and the blue Martian ships were skimming across the whispering sands. At first his own ship would not move, then he remembered the sand anchor and yanked it in.

‘There!’

The wind hurled the sand ship keening over the dead sea bottom, over long-buried crystals, past upended pillars, past deserted docks of marble and brass, past dead white chess cities, past purple foothills, into distance. The figures of the Martian ships receded and then began to pace Sam’s ship.

‘Guess I showed them, by God!’ cried Sam. ‘I’ll report to the Rocket Corporation. They’ll give me protection! I’m pretty quick.’

‘They could have stopped you if they wanted,’ Elma said tiredly. ‘They just didn’t bother.’

He laughed. ‘Come off it. Why should they let me get off? No, they weren’t quick enough, is all.’

‘Weren’t they?’ Elma nodded behind him.

He did not turn. He felt a cold wind blowing. He was afraid to turn. He felt something in the seat behind him, something as frail as your breath on a cold morning, something as blue as hickory-wood smoke at twilight, something like old white lace, something like a snowfall, something like the icy rime of winter on the brittle sedge.

There was a sound as of a thin plate of glass broken—laughter. Then silence. He turned.

The young woman sat at the tiller bench quietly. Her wrists were thin as icicles, her eyes as clear as the moons and as large, steady and white.

The wind blew at her and, like an image on cold water, she rippled, silk standing out from her frail body in tatters of blue rain.

'Go back,' she said.

'No.' Sam was quivering, the fine, delicate fear-quivering of a hornet suspended in the air, undecided between fear and hate. 'Get off my ship!'

'This isn't your ship,' said the vision. 'It's old as our world. It sailed the sand seas ten thousand years ago when the seas were whispered away and the docks were empty, and you came and took it, stole it. Now turn it around, go back to the crossroad place. We have need to talk with you. Something important has happened.'

'Get off my ship!' said Sam. He took a gun from his holster with a creak of leather. He pointed it carefully. 'Jump off before I count three or—'  
'Don't!' cried the girl. 'I won't hurt you. Neither will the others. We came in peace!'

'One,' said Sam.

'Sam!' said Elma.

'Listen to me,' said the girl.

'Two,' said Sam firmly, cocking the gun trigger.

'Sam!' cried Elma.

'Three,' said Sam.

'We only—' said the girl.

The gun went off.

In the sunlight, snow melts, crystals evaporate into a steam, into nothing. In the firelight, vapors dance and vanish. In the core of a volcano, fragile things burst and disappear. The girl, in the gunfire, in the heat, in the concussion, folded like a soft scarf, melted like a crystal figurine. What was left of her, ice, snowflake, smoke, blew away in the wind. The tiller seat was empty.

Sam holstered his gun and did not look at his wife.



'Sam,' she said after a minute more of traveling, whispering over the moon-colored sea of sand, 'stop the ship.'

He looked at her and his face was pale. 'No, you don't. Not after all this time, you're not pulling out on me.'

She looked at his hand on his gun. 'I believe you would' she said. 'You actually would.'

He jerked his head from side to side, hand tight on the tiller bar. 'Elma, this is crazy. We'll be in town in a minute, we'll be okay!'

'Yes,' said his wife, lying back cold in the ship.

'Elma, listen to me.'

'There's nothing to hear, Sam.'

'Elma!'

They were passing a little white chess city, and in his frustration, in his rage, he sent six bullets crashing among the crystal towers. The city dissolved in a shower of ancient glass and splintered quartz. It fell away like carved soap, shattered. It was no more. He laughed and fired again, and one last tower, one last chess piece, took fire, ignited, and in blue flinders went up to the stars.

'I'll show them! I'll show everybody!'

'Go ahead, show us, Sam.' She lay in the shadows.

'Here comes another city!' Sam reloaded his gun. 'Watch me fix it!'

The blue phantom ships loomed up behind them, drawing steadily apace. He did not see them at first. He was only aware of a whistling and a high windy screaming, as of steel on sand, and it was the sound of the sharp razor prows of the sand ships preening the sea bottoms, their red pennants, blue pennants unfurled.

In the blue light ships were blue dark images, masked men, men with silvery faces, men with blue stars for eyes, men with carved golden

ears, men with tinfoil cheeks and ruby-studded lips, men with arms folded, men following him, Martian men.

One, two, three, Sam counted. The Martian ships closed in.

‘Elma, Elma. I can’t hold them all off!’

Elma did not speak or rise from where she had slumped.

Sam fired his gun eight times. One of the sand ships fell apart, the sail, the emerald body, the bronze hull points, the moon-white tiller, and all the separate images in it. The masked men, all of them, dug into the sand and separated out into orange and then smoke-flame.

But the other ships closed in.

‘I’m outnumbered, Elma!’ he cried. ‘They’ll kill me!’

He threw out the anchor. It was no use. The sail fluttered down, folding unto itself, sighing. The ship stopped. The wind stopped. Travel stopped. Mars stood still as the majestic vessels of the Martians drew around and hesitated over him.

‘Earth Man,’ a voice called from a high seat somewhere. A silverine mask moved. Ruby-rimmed lips glittered with the words.

‘I didn’t do anything!’ Sam looked at all the faces, one hundred in all, that surrounded him. There weren’t many Martians left on Mars—one hundred, one hundred and fifty, all told. And most of them were here now, on the dead seas, in their resurrected ships, by their dead chess cities, one of which had just fallen like some fragile vase hit by a pebble. The silverine masks glinted.

‘It was all a mistake,’ he pleaded, standing out of his ship, his wife slumped behind him in the deeps of the hold, like a dead woman. ‘I came to Mars like any honest enterprising businessman. I took some surplus material from a rocket that crashed and I built me the finest little stand you ever saw right there on that land by the crossroads—you know where it is.’

You've got to admit it's a good job of building.' Sam laughed, staring around. 'And that Martian—I know he was a friend of yours—came. His death was an accident. I assure you. All I wanted to do was have a hotdog stand, the only one on Mars, the first and most important one. You understand how it is? I was going to serve the best darned hot dogs there, with chili and onions and orange juice.'

The silver masks did not move. They burned in the moonlight. Yellow eyes shone upon Sam. He felt his stomach clench in, wither, become a rock. He threw his gun in the sand.

'I give up.'

'Pick up your gun,' said the Martians in chorus.

'What?'

'Your gun.' A jeweled hand waved from the prow of a blue ship. 'Pick it up. Put it away.'

Unbelieving, he picked up the gun.

'Now,' said the voice, 'turn your ship and go back to your stand.'

'Now?'

'Now,' said the voice. 'We will not harm you. You ran away before we were able to explain. Come.'

Now the great ships turned as lightly as moon thistles. Their wing-sails flapped with a sound of soft applause on the air. The masks were coruscating, turning, firing the shadows.

'Elma!' Sam tumbled into the ship. 'Get up, Elma. We're going back.' He was excited. He almost gibbered with relief. 'They aren't going to hurt me, kill me, Elma. Get up, honey, get up.'

'What—what?' Elma blinked around and slowly, as the ship was sent into the wind again, she helped herself, as in a dream, back up to a seat and slumped there like a sack of stones, saying no more.

The sand slid under the ship. In half an hour they were back at the crossroads, the ships planted, all of them out of the ships.

The Leader stood before Sam and Elma, his mask beaten of polished bronze, the eyes only empty slits of endless blue-black, the mouth a slot out of which words drifted into the wind.

‘Ready your stand,’ said the voice. A diamond-gloved hand waved. ‘Prepare the viands, prepare the foods, prepare the strange wines, for tonight is indeed a great night!’

‘You mean,’ said Sam, ‘you’ll let me stay on here?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re not mad at me?’

The mask was rigid and carved and cold and sightless.

‘Prepare your place of food,’ said the voice softly. ‘And take this.’

‘What is it?’

Sam blinked at the silver-foil scroll that was handed him, upon which, in hieroglyph, snake figures danced.

‘It is the land grant to all of the territory from the silver mountains to the blue hills, from the dead salt sea there to the distant valleys of moonstone and emerald,’ said the Leader.

‘M-mine?’ said Sam, incredulous.

‘Yours.’

‘One hundred thousand miles of territory?’

‘Yours.’

‘Did you hear that, Elma?’

Elma was sitting on the ground, leaning against the aluminum hot-dog stand, eyes shut.

‘But why, why—why are you giving me all this?’ asked Sam, trying to look into the metal slots of the eyes.

‘That is not all, Here.’ Six other scrolls were produced. The names were declared, the territories announced.

‘Why, that’s half of Mars! I own half of Mars!’ Sam rattled the scrolls in his fists. He shook them at Elma, insane with laughing. ‘Elma, did you hear?’

‘I heard,’ said Elma, looking at the sky. She seemed to be watching for something. She was becoming a little more alert now.

‘Thank you, oh, thank you,’ said Sam to the bronze mask. ‘Tonight is the night,’ said the mask. ‘You must be ready.’

‘I will be. What is it—a surprise? Are the rockets coming through earlier than we thought, a month earlier from Earth? All ten thousand rockets, bringing the settlers, the miners, the workers and their wives, all hundred thousand of them? Won’t that be swell, Elma? You see, I told you. I told you, that town there won’t always have just one thousand people in it.

There’ll be fifty thousand more coming, and the month after that a hundred thousand more, and by the end of the year five million Earth Men. And me with the only hot-dog stand staked out on the busiest highway to the mines!’

The mask floated on the wind. ‘We leave you. Prepare. The land is yours.’

In the blowing moonlight, like metal petals of some ancient flower, like blue plumes, like cobalt butterflies immense and quiet, the old ships turned and moved over the shifting sands, the masks beaming and glittering, until the last shine, the last blue color, was lost among the hills.

'Elma, why did they do it? Why didn't they kill me? Don't they know anything? What's wrong with them? Elma, do you understand?' He shook her shoulder. 'I own half of Mars!' She watched the night sky, waiting.

'Come on,' he said. 'We've got to get the place fixed. All the hot dogs boiling, the buns warm, the chili cooking, the onions peeled and diced, the relish laid out, the napkins in the clips, the place spotless! Hey!' He did a little wild dance, kicking his heels. 'Oh boy, I'm happy; yes, sir, I'm happy,' he sang, off key. 'This is my lucky day!'

He boiled the hot dogs, cut the buns, sliced the onions in a frenzy.

'Just think, that Martian said a surprise. That can only mean one thing. Elma. Those hundred thousand people coming in ahead of schedule, tonight, of all nights! We'll be flooded! We'll work long hours for days, what with tourists riding around seeing things. Elma. Think of the money!'

He went out and looked at the sky. He didn't see anything. 'In a minute, maybe,' he said, snuffing the cool air gratefully, arms up, beating his chest. 'Ah!'

Elma said nothing. She peeled potatoes for French fries quietly, her eyes always on the sky.

'Sam,' she said half an hour later. 'There it is. Look.'

He looked and saw it.

Earth.

It rose full and green, like a fine-cut stone, above the hills.

'Good old Earth,' he whispered lovingly. 'Good old wonderful Earth. Send me your hungry and your starved. Something, something—how does that poem go? Send me your hungry, old Earth. Here's Sam Parkhill, his hot dogs all boiled, his chili cooking, everything neat as a pin. Come on, you Earth, send me your rockets!'

He went out to look at his place. There it sat, perfect as a fresh-laid egg on the dead sea bottom, the only nucleus of light and warmth in hundreds of miles of lonely wasteland. It was like a heart beating alone in a great dark body. He felt almost sorrowful with pride, gazing at it with wet eyes.

‘It sure makes you humble,’ he said among the cooking odors of wieners, warm buns, rich butter. ‘Step up,’ he invited the various stars in the sky. ‘Who’ll be the first to buy?’

‘Sam,’ said Elma.

Earth changed in the black sky.

It caught fire.

Part of it seemed to come apart in a million pieces, as if a gigantic jigsaw had exploded.

It burned with an unholy dripping glare for a minute, three times normal size, then dwindled.

‘What was that?’ Sam looked at the green fire in the sky.

‘Earth,’ said Elma, holding her hands together.

‘That can’t be Earth, that’s not Earth! No, that ain’t Earth! It can’t be.’

‘You mean it couldn’t be Earth,’ said Elma, looking at him. ‘That just isn’t Earth. No, that’s not Earth: is that what you mean?’

‘Not Earth—oh no, it couldn’t be,’ he wailed.

He stood there, his hands at his sides, his mouth open, his eyes wide and dull, not moving.

'Sam.' She called his name. For the first time in days her eyes were bright. 'Sam?'

He looked up at the sky.

'Well,' she said. She glanced around for a minute or so in silence. Then briskly she flapped a wet towel over her arm. 'Switch on more lights, turn up the music, open the doors.'

There'll be another batch of customers along in about a million years. Gotta be ready, yes, sir.'

Sam did not move.

'What a swell spot for a hot-dog stand,' she said. She reached over and picked a toothpick out of a jar and put it between her front teeth. 'Let you in on a little secret, Sam,' she whispered, leaning toward him. 'This looks like it's going to be an off season.'

The end