

The Silent Towns, Ray Bradbury

The Silent Towns

There was a little white silent town on the edge of the dead Martian sea. The town was empty. No one moved in it.

Lonely lights burned in the stores all day. The shop doors were wide, as if people had run off without using their keys.

Magazines, brought from Earth on the silver rocket a month before, fluttered, untouched, burning brown, on wire racks fronting the silent drugstores.

The town was dead. Its beds were empty and cold. The only sound was the power hum of electric lines and dynamos, still alive, all by themselves. Water ran in forgotten bathtubs, poured out into living rooms, onto porches, and down through little garden plots to feed neglected flowers.

In the dark theaters, gum under the many seats began to harden with tooth impressions still in it.

Across town was a rocket port. You could still smell the hard, scorched smell where the last rocket blasted off when it went back to Earth. If you dropped a dime in the telescope and pointed it at Earth, perhaps you could see the big war happening there.

Perhaps you could see New York explode. Maybe London could be seen, covered with a new kind of fog. Perhaps then it might be understood why this small Martian town is abandoned. How quick was the evacuation? Walk in any store, bang the NO SALE key. Cash drawers jump out, all bright and jingly with coins. That war on Earth must be very bad...

Along the empty avenues of this town, now, whistling softly, kicking a tin can ahead of him in deepest concentration, came a tall, thin man. His eyes glowed with a dark, quiet look of loneliness.

He moved his bony hands in his pockets, which were tinkling with new dimes. Occasionally he tossed a dime to the ground. He laughed temperately, doing this, and walked on, sprinkling bright dimes everywhere.

His name was Walter Gripp. He had a placer mine and a remote shack far up in the blue Martian hills and he walked to town once every two weeks to see if he could marry a quiet and intelligent woman. Over the years he had always returned to his shack, alone and disappointed. A week ago, arriving in town, he had found it this way!

That day he had been so surprised that he rushed to a delicatessen, flung wide a case, and ordered a triple-decker beef sandwich. 'Coming up!' he cried, a towel on his arm.

He flourished meats and bread baked the day before, dusted a table, invited himself to sit, and ate until he had to go find a soda fountain, where he ordered a bicarbonate. The druggist, being one Walter Gripp, was astoundingly polite and fizzed one right up for him!

He stuffed his jeans with money, all he could find. He loaded a boy's wagon with ten-dollar bills and ran lickety-split through town. Reaching the suburbs, he suddenly realized how shamefully silly he was.

He didn't need money. He rode the ten-dollar bills back to where he'd found them, counted a dollar from his own wallet to pay for the sandwiches, dropped it in the delicatessen till, and added a quarter tip.

That night he enjoyed a hot Turkish bath, a succulent filet carpeted with delicate mushrooms, imported dry sherry, and strawberries in wine. He fitted himself for a new blue flannel suit, and a rich gray Homburg which balanced oddly atop his gaunt head.

He slid money into a juke box which played 'That Old Gang of Mine.' He dropped nickels in twenty boxes all over town. The lonely streets and the night were full of the sad music of 'That Old Gang of Mine' as he walked, tall and thin and alone, his new shoes clumping softly, his cold hands in his pockets.

But that was a week past. He slept in a good house on Mars Avenue, rose mornings at nine, bathed, and idled to town for ham and eggs. No morning passed that he didn't freeze a ton of meats, vegetables, and lemon cream pies, enough to last ten years, until the rockets came back from Earth, if they ever came.

Now, tonight, he drifted up and down, seeing the wax women in every colorful shop window, pink and beautiful. For the first time he knew how dead the town was. He drew a glass of beer and sobbed gently.

'Why,' he said, 'I'm all alone.'

He entered the Elite Theater to show himself a film, to distract his mind from his isolation. The theater was hollow, empty, like a tomb with phantoms crawling gray and black on the vast screen. Shivering, he hurried from the haunted place.

Having decided to return home, he was striking down the middle of a side street, almost running, when he heard the phone. He listened.

'Phone ringing in someone's house.'

He proceeded briskly.

'Someone should answer that phone,' he mused.

He sat on a curb to pick a rock from his shoe, idly.

'Someone!' he screamed, leaping. 'Me! Good Lord, what's wrong with me!' he shrieked. He whirled. Which house? That one!

He raced over the lawn, up the steps, into the house, down a dark hall. He yanked up the receiver.

'Hello!' he cried.

Buzzzzzzzzzz.

'Hello, hello!'

They had hung up.

'Hello!' he shouted, and banged the phone. 'You stupid idiot!' he cried to himself. 'Sitting on that curb, you fool! Oh, you damned and awful fool!' He squeezed the phone. 'Come on, ring again! Come on!'

He had never thought there might be others left on Mars. In the entire week he had seen on one. He had figured that all other towns were as empty as this one.

Now, staring at this terrible little black phone, he trembled. Interlocking dial systems connected every town on Mars. From which of the thirty cities had the call come?

He didn't know.

He waited. He wandered to the strange kitchen, thawed some iced huckle-berries, ate them disconsolately.

'There wasn't anyone on the other end of that call,' he murmured. 'Maybe a pole blew down somewhere and the phone rang by itself.'

But hadn't he heard a click, which meant someone had hung up far away?

He stood in the hall the rest of the night. 'Not because of the phone,' he told himself. 'I just haven't anything else to do.'

He listened to his watch tick.

'She won't phone back,' he said. 'She won't ever call a number that didn't answer. She's probably dialing other houses in town right now! And here I sit—Wait a minute!' He laughed. 'Why do I keep saying "she"?''

He blinked. 'It could as easily be a "he," couldn't it?'
His heart slowed. He felt very cold and hollow.

He wanted very much for it to be a 'she.'

He walked out of the house and stood in the center of the early, dim morning street.

He listened. Not a sound. No birds. No cars. Only his heart beating. Beat and pause and beat again. His face ached with strain. The wind blew gently, oh so gently, flapping his coat.

'Shh,' he whispered. 'Listen.'

He swayed in a slow circle, turning his head from one silent house to another.

She'll phone more and more numbers, he thought. It must be a woman.

Why? Only a woman would call and call. A man wouldn't. A man's independent. Did I phone anyone? No! Never thought of it. It must be a woman. It has to be, by God!

Listen.

Far away, under the stars, a phone rang.

He ran. He stopped to listen. The ringing, soft. He ran a few more steps. Louder. He raced down an alley. Louder still! He passed six houses, six more. Much louder! He chose a house and its door was locked.

The phone rang inside.

'Damn you!' He jerked the doorknob.

The phone screamed.

He heaved a porch chair through the parlor window, leaped in after it. Before he even touched the phone, it was silent.

He stalked through the house then and broke mirrors, tore down drapes, and kicked in the kitchen stove.

Finally, exhausted, he picked up the thin directory which listed every phone on Mars. Fifty thousand names.

He started with number one.

Amelia Ames. He dialed her number in New Chicago, one hundred miles over the dead sea.

No answer.

Number two lived in New New York, five thousand miles across the blue mountains.

No answer.

He called three, four, five, six, seven, eight, his fingers jerking, unable to grip the receiver.

A woman's voice answered, 'Hello?'

Walter cried back at her, 'Hello, oh Lord, hello!'

'This is a recording,' recited the woman's voice. 'Miss Helen Arasumian is not home. Will you leave a message on the wire spool so she may call you when she returns? Hello? This is a recording. Miss Arasumian is not home. Will you leave a message—'

He hung up.

He sat with his mouth twitching.

On second thought he redialed that number.

'When Miss Helen Arasumian comes home,' he said, 'tell her to go to hell.'

He phoned Mars Junction, New Boston, Arcadia, and Roosevelt City exchanges, theorizing that they would be logical places for persons to dial from: after that he contacted local city halls and other public institutions in each town. He phoned the best hotels. Leave it to a woman to put herself up in luxury.

Suddenly he stopped, clapped his hands sharply together, and laughed. Of course! He checked the directory and dialed a long-distance call through to the biggest beauty parlor in New Texas City. If ever there was a place where a woman would putter around, patting mud packs

on her face and sitting under a drier, it would be a velvet-soft, diamondgem beauty parlor!

The phone rang. Someone at the other end lifted the receiver.

A woman's voice said, 'Hello?'

'If this is a recording,' announced Walter Gripp, 'I'll come over and blow the place up.'

'This isn't a record,' said the woman's voice. 'Hello! Oh, hello, there is someone alive! Where are you?' She gave a delighted scream.

Walter almost collapsed. 'You!' He stood up jerkily, eyes wild. 'Good Lord, what luck, what's your name?'

'Genevieve Selsor!' She wept into the receiver. 'Oh, I'm so glad to hear from you, whoever you are!'

'Walter Gripp!'

'Walter, hello, Walter!'

'Hello, Genevieve!'

'Walter. It's such a nice name. Walter, Walter!'

'Thank you.'

'Walter, where are you?'

Her voice was so kind and sweet and fine. He held the phone tight to his ear so she could whisper sweetly into it. He felt his feet drift off the floor. His cheeks burned.

'I'm in Marlin Village,' he said. 'I—'

Buzz.

'Hello?' he said.

Buzz.

He jiggled the hook. Nothing.

Somewhere a wind had blown down a pole. As quickly as she had come. Genevieve Selsor was gone.
He dialed, but the line was dead.

'I know where she is, anyway.' He ran out of the house. The sun was rising as he backed a beetle-car from the stranger's garage, filled its back seat with food from the house, and set out at eighty miles an hour down the highway, heading for New Texas City.

A thousand miles, he thought. Genevieve Selsor, sit tight, you'll hear from me!

He honked his horn on every turn out of town.

At sunset, after an impossible day of driving, he pulled to the roadside, kicked off his tight shoes, laid himself out in the seat, and slid the gray Homburg over his weary eyes. His breathing became slow and regular.

The wind blew and the stars shone gently upon him in the new dusk. The Martian mountains lay all around, millions of years old. Starlight glittered on the spires of a little Martian town, no bigger than a game of chess, in the blue hills.

He lay in the half-place between awakeness and dreams. He whispered, Genevieve. Oh, Genevieve, sweet Genevieve, he sang softly, the years may come, the years may go.

But Genevieve, sweet Genevieve... There was a warmth in him. He heard her quiet sweet cool voice sighing. Hello, oh, hello, Walter! This is no record. Where are you. Walter, where are you?

He sighed, putting up a hand to touch her in the moonlight. Long dark hair shaking in the wind; beautiful, it was. And her lips like red peppermints. And her cheeks like fresh-cut wet roses.

And her body like a clear vaporous mist, while her soft cool sweet voice crooned to him once more the words to the old sad song, Oh, Genevieve, sweet Genevieve, the years may come, the years may go...

He slept.

He reached New Texas City at midnight.

He halted before the Deluxe Beauty Salon, yelling.

He expected her to rush out, all perfume, all laughter.

Nothing happened.

'She's asleep.' He walked to the door. 'Here I am!' he called. 'Hello, Genevieve!'

The town lay in double moonlit silence. Somewhere a wind flapped a canvas awning.

He swung the glass door wide and stepped in.

'Hey!' He laughed uneasily. 'Don't hide! I know you're here!'

He searched every booth.

He found a tiny handkerchief on the floor. It smelled so good he almost lost his balance. 'Genevieve,' he said.

He drove the car through the empty streets but saw nothing. 'If this is a practical joke...'

He slowed the car. 'Wait a minute. We were cut off. Maybe she drove to Marlin Village while I was driving here! She probably took the old Sea Road. We missed each other during the day. How'd she know I'd come get her?

I didn't say I would. And she was so afraid when the phone died that she rushed to Marlin Village to find me! And here I am, by God, what a fool I am!'

Giving the born a blow, he shot out of town.

He drove all night. He thought. What if she isn't in Marlin Village waiting, when I arrive?

He wouldn't think of that. She must be there. And he would run up and hold her and perhaps even kiss her, once, on the lips.

Genevieve, sweet Genevieve, he whistled, stepping it up to one hundred miles an hour.

Marlin Village was quiet at dawn. Yellow lights were still burning in several stores, and a juke box that had played steadily for one hundred hours finally, with a crackle of electricity, ceased, making the silence complete. The sun warmed the streets and warmed the cold and vacant sky.

Walter turned down Main Street, the car lights still on, honking the horn a double toot, six times at one corner, six times at another. He peered at the store names. His face was white and tired, and his hands slid on the sweaty steering wheel.

'Genevieve!' he called in the empty street.

The door to a beauty salon opened.

'Genevieve!' He stopped the car.

Genevieve Selsor stood in the open door of the salon as he ran across the street. A box of cream chocolates lay open in her arms. Her fingers, cuddling it, were plump and pallid.

Her face, as she stepped into the light, was round and thick, and her eyes were like two immense eggs stuck into a white mess of bread dough.

Her legs were as big around as the stumps of trees, and she moved with an ungainly shuffle. Her hair was an indiscriminate shade of brown that had been made and remade, it appeared, as a nest for birds.

She had no lips at all and compensated this by stenciling on a large red, greasy mouth that now popped open in delight, now shut in sudden alarm. She had plucked her brows to thin antenna lines.

Walter stopped. His smile dissolved. He stood looking at her.

She dropped her candy box to the sidewalk.

'Are you—Genevieve Selsor?' His ears rang.

'Are you Walter Griff?' she asked.

'Gripp.'

'Gripp,' she corrected herself.

'How do you do,' he said with a restrained voice.

'How do you do.' She shook his hand.

Her fingers were sticky with chocolate.

'Well,' said Walter Gripp.

'What?' asked Genevieve Selsor.

'I just said, "Well,"' said Walter.

'Oh.'

It was nine o'clock at night. They had spent the day picnicking, and for supper he had prepared a filet mignon which she didn't like because it was too rare, so he broiled it some more and it was too much broiled or fried or something. He laughed and said, 'We'll see a movie!'

She said okay and put her chocolaty fingers on his elbow. But all she wanted to see was a fifty-year-old film of Clark Gable. 'Doesn't he just kill you?' She giggled. 'Doesn't he kill you, now?' The film ended. 'Run it off again,' she commanded. 'Again?' he asked.

'Again,' she said. And when he returned she snuggled up and put her paws all over him. 'You're not quite what I expected, but you're nice,' she admitted. 'Thanks,' he said, swallowing. 'Oh, that Gable,' she said, and pinched his leg. 'Ouch,' he said.

After the film they went shopping down the silent streets. She broke a window and put on the brightest dress she could find. Dumping a

perfume bottle on her hair, she resembled a drowned sheep dog. 'How old are you?' he inquired. 'Guess.'

Dripping, she led him down the street. 'Oh, thirty,' he said. 'Well,' she announced stiffly, 'I'm only twenty-seven, so there!

'Here's another candy store!' she said. 'Honest, I've led the life of Riley since everything exploded. I never liked my folks, they were fools. They left for Earth two months ago. I was supposed to follow on the last rocket, but I stayed on: you know why?'

'Why?'

'Because everyone picked on me. So I stayed where I could throw perfume on myself all day and drink ten thousand malts and eat candy without people saying. 'Oh, that's full of calories!' So here I am!'

'Here you are.' Walter shut his eyes.

'It's getting late,' she said, looking at him.

'Yes.'

'I'm tired,' she said.

'Funny. I'm wide awake.'

'Oh,' she said.

'I feel like staying up all night,' he said. 'Say, there's a good record at Mike's. Come on, I'll play it for you.'

'I'm tired.' She glanced up at him with sly, bright eyes.

'I'm very alert,' he said. 'Strange.'

'Come back to the beauty shop,' she said. 'I want to show you something.'

She took him in through the glass door and walked him over to a large white box. 'When I drove from Texas City,' she said. 'I brought this with me.' She untied the pink ribbon. 'I thought: Well, here I am, the only lady on Mars, and here is the only man, and, well...' She lifted the lid

and folded back crisp layers of whispery pink tissue paper. She gave it a pat. 'There.'

Walter Gripp stared.

'What is it?' he asked, beginning to tremble.

'Don't you know, silly? It's all lace and all white and all fine and everything.'

'No, I don't know what it is.'

'It's a wedding dress, silly!'

'Is it?' His voice cracked.

He shut his eyes. Her voice was still soft and cool and sweet, as it had been on the phone. But when he opened his eyes and looked at her...

He backed up. 'How nice,' he said.

'Isn't it?'

'Genevieve.' He glanced at the door.

'Yes?'

'Genevieve, I've something to tell you.'

'Yes?' She drifted toward him, the perfume smell thick about her round white face.

'The thing I have to say to you is...' he said.

'Yes?'

'Good-by!'

And he was out the door and into his car before she could scream.

She ran and stood on the curb as he swung the car about.

'Walter Griff, come back here!' she wailed, flinging up her arms.

'Gripp,' he corrected her.

'Gripp!' she shouted.

The car whirled away down the silent street, regardless of her stompings and shriekings. The exhaust from it fluttered the white dress she crumpled in her plump hands, and the stars shone bright, and the car vanished out onto the desert and away into blackness.

He drove all night and all day for three nights and days. Once he thought he saw a car following, and he broke into a shivering sweat and took another highway, cutting off across the lonely Martian world, past little dead cities, and he drove and drove for a week and a day, until he had put ten thousand miles between himself and Marlin Village.

Then he pulled into a small town named Holtville Springs, where there were some tiny stores he could light up at night and restaurants to sit in, ordering meals.

And he's lived there ever since, with two deep freezes packed with food to last him one hundred years, and enough cigars to last ten thousand days, and a good bed with a soft mattress.

And when once in a while over the long years the phone rings—he doesn't answer.

The end