

THIRD PLACE, FLASH FICTION
EMILY HOWSLEY

Atomic City, USA

Location: Casino

Prop: Pocket Mirror

Line Portion: "Did you hear that?"

Charlie, known by his byline line Charles S. Anderson, walked through the McCarran Field terminal wondering if he had landed on another planet. He was just one in the swarm of 200 reporters and cameramen who had descended on Las Vegas to witness a nuclear bomb detonation the next day.

For residents, testing had become commonplace since 1951; however, this was the first time reporters and cameramen were invited to witness, film, and broadcast the detonation of a nuclear bomb in the United States.

Riding in the cab to the hotel, Charlie mused to himself that Las Vegas could be seen as a testament to man's hubris to make a modern oasis out of a dirt kingdom. Charlie was somewhat uneasy that only 65 miles away, the government was bombing within its own borders, but the Atomic Energy Commission assured the nation it was all above board.

The stark hues of the desert palette were a sharp change from the green hills and corn fields of Pennsylvania. Later that evening, he explored the Last Frontier hotel and adjacent Silver Slipper casino, replete with luxurious decor.

He quickly felt underdressed and out-of-place in his best suit among the opulent swirls of tuxedos, sapphire blue silk, pearls, and diamonds flowing through the casino. The roulette wheels were spinning hot around him and the sounds of the house band's classic swing tunes were filling the air.

Seated out of the way, but near the blackjack tables, Charlie rested in a comfortable leather chair. He took out a notebook from his suit jacket pocket to begin prepping some notes for his article.

Lost in contemplation, he didn't notice the beautiful young cocktail waitress. "Sir, excuse me, sir?" A young woman's voice called, breaking through his reverie.

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry, how can I help you?" He shook his head as he snapped to attention as he saw the waitress, a tall, lithe, and blonde with a name tag that said Mary Lee.

"What can I get you to drink?," she asked a bit hesitant then adding an upbeat perky bounce to

her voice. "We've got the best Atomic Cocktails in town."

Charlie nodded and decided to try the tourist special. Everyone was cashing in on the Atomic City craze. He began reviewing his notes and press information from the Atomic Energy Commission. The press were calling the 31-kiloton device "Big Shot." It was bigger than the bombs dropped in Japan combined.

As his mind drifted back to those war years, he thought of his beloved older brother Jimmy, who died in the war. When Pearl Harbor hit, Jimmy wanted to enlist right away, but mom insisted he needed to finish high school, which was only in 5 months. Charlie suspected their mom hoped the war would be over by then.

Sometime in the summer of 1944, a knock on the door came. Charlie remembered he was home on summer vacation, reading the latest comics when he heard a guttural shriek from his mother. Jimmy had died at Utah Beach during D-Day. A wave of sadness and grief washed over Charlie. He couldn't believe it had been eight years.

He hadn't noticed the waitress had come back with his drink - a bright, fizzy drink with a plastic atomic symbol cocktail pick in the glass.

"You here for the bombs?" Mary Lee asked, striking up a bit of conversation with Charlie, as she handed him the drink and a cocktail napkin.

"You mean tomorrow's detonation?" Charlie responded.

"Yeah, I hear it's going to be a big one, but after a while of 'em, you kinda forget about them," the waitress replied with a casual tone. "Buses of tourists go out to watch them, but I've never done it."

"Really?" Charlie asked incredulously. It seemed to him hard to imagine nuclear detonation as mundane.

The waitress shrugged as she said, "yeah, it's been going on for a year, you get used to the clouds, the sound, the trembles."

"Well, Charlie countered, this is the first time the press and the cameraman too - it'll be the first time it will be recorded," he shared. "You'll be able to see it as if you were there!"

Mary Lee's eyes grew wide as she registered that this was no ordinary test.

She looked around the slot machine area and caught the attention of another waitress. The waitress with very long legs and long brown waves in her hair had been using her pocket mirror to reapply her Revlon red lipstick when she heard Mary Lee call her.

“Hey Mabel! Mabel,” she called, “did you hear that the bomb drop tomorrow will be shown on TV?”

Mabel’s expression turned to shock and her very red lips moved into a surprised formation as she shook her head.

“Wow, Mary Lee, that’s going to be something alright,” Mabel called back as she motioned to her watch indicating she had to get back to work.

Mabel tucked her pocket mirror and lipstick into her apron pocket as she sauntered over to take the next round of orders from a raucous group of tourists. Mary Lee also started circling her tables as Charlie finished his drink. It was delicious and he decided to tuck the atomic cocktail pick into his notebook for a memento.

As Charlie continued to weave through the glittering tuxedo and silk crowd, he felt like Nick Carraway attending a Long Island soiree. He half expected to see Gatsby wander in with an entourage.

Tuesday morning came swiftly and Charlie was herded onto a bus out to News Nob, just 10 miles out from the denotation site. He wondered if Mary Lee and her fellow waitress Mabel would be watching.

Greeted by military men, they handed out dark goggles to the crowd. Cameramen set up their gear and they all waited in the surprisingly cold desert air. When the bomb finally dropped and a signal to look was given, Charlie turned his head towards ground zero.