

DANIEL TAYLOR

MY NUCLEAR FAMILY

I AM SITTING IN FATHER'S MAKESHIFT BOMB SHELTER, bathed in the blue-grey glow of static from a dead channel. Even here, underground, the warmth of summer lingers on towards mid-September, and the furnace sits idle in the corner. I am only wearing this faded and ragged blanket around my shoulders for comfort as I sit cross-legged on the soft, plush upholstery of a passenger seat salvaged from a 1989 Dodge cargo van. With careful balancing, I will make it recline and sleep soundly tonight.

Father is asleep now, prone and sprawling across the mattress of his pull-out couch. Although there are only these two meagre pieces of comfortable furniture here, the basement is anything but bare, as there are also shelves, a night table, a fridge, a coffee maker, a microwave oven, a space heater, a hotplate, and an alarm clock. There is also a basin sink that provides hot and cold water and can be used as a latrine if necessary. The appliances will no longer work when the electricity fails—as Father says it will—but we will still be able to read books by candlelight.

I have yet to unpack my aqua green duffle bag, which is hanging on a rod beneath the staircase that leads to the main floor. It is hanging next to cotton pants, collared shirts, and various ties that Father wears to work at the newspaper. He says that he will never return there, as it will soon be incinerated by an atomic blast.

The walls are lined with cans, cases, cardboard boxes, metal canisters, and plastic bottles of water—enough sustenance to last long after I leave. The shelves are also crammed with foil-wrapped rations of dehydrated fruit and vegetables, plastic jars of potassium iodide pills, first-aid supplies, and packages of D batteries. An air filtration unit, which is already connected to a Honda gas-powered generator, sits ready below the cold air return vent. It is needless to keep listing: “Headquarters Omega,” as Father calls it with a half-smile, is prepared for the worst.

I crush out the glowing embers of a filter and lean forwards to seek out

another videotape from the shelf below the television. The cassette slides into the VCR with the clicks and clacks of plastic on metal, and the snowy screen of the dead channel flickers to life. Its familiar images are no doubt reflected in the irises of my eyes, but I hardly see them, as my mind dwells on the past.

“Thirty-seven seconds!” cried Father. He slapped his hand across his knee as he passed his stopwatch first to my groggy mother and then to me. “I’d like to see any family in Orillia beat that! You can bet *this* family won’t be caught in the blast when the Ruskie push the button! *Thirty-seven seconds!*”

My heart was still racing as I clutched the stopwatch in my chubby fingers, nodding in solemn appreciation at the numbers that I did not yet know how to read. Aside from Father’s sporadic exclamations of “Thirty-seven seconds!” the basement was strangely quiet. Only moments earlier the entire house had been brimming with an explosive cacophony of sounds: the thunder of our feet on the stairs, the hoarse shouts of my father, and my ecstatic shrieks as I pushed on my mother’s behind in my own tiny effort to improve our time. Whenever we found ourselves in the basement after a bomb drill, the quiet that followed our staged escape seemed almost eerie by comparison.

It was not until I entered elementary school that I discovered my home life was not like those of other children. Until that point, I had assumed that all children were arbitrarily roused from sleep in the middle of the night by the clang of a cowbell, that it was normal to find oneself huddled in the basement just before dawn, that all basements were stockpiled with tins of non-perishables and cooler jugs of distilled water, and that all fathers ran up and down the stairs at four o’clock in the morning screaming “This is it! This is the end!” How was I to know any different?

Father saw the drills as a solemn duty to his family. It was his responsibility as head of the household to make sure that we were well-prepared. When nuclear warheads began sailing through the air—as he was certain they would at any moment—he wanted our reactions to be automatic. To him, these exercises were a man’s obligation to his loved ones.

As far as I was concerned, Father’s drills were tremendous fun. When else was running in the house permitted, much less encouraged? This was the time when our family was at its liveliest and when Father was at his best.

The noise, the shouting, the running—I loved it all. It was all I could do to stifle my squeals, and it puzzled me to no end that Mother always shuffled down the stairs with a crumpled face, ducking her head and furrowing her brow at the noise. Unlike Father, she didn't think that any of it was the least bit necessary. Unlike me, she didn't think that any of it was the least bit fun.

Father prided himself on having the leanest drill time in our neighbourhood and (he often ventured) the entire city. I always believed this to be true, which indeed it was. Only when I began school did I realize that this was because nobody else in our neighbourhood and (I would venture) the entire city staged nuclear bomb drills. Thirty-seven seconds would be the fastest time we ever achieved for getting mother, father, and son from the bedrooms upstairs to the shelter in the basement. Our time would only improve when Mother stopped participating.

I heard their first argument through the furnace vent that led to the basement. Father had given me my very own stopwatch the Christmas before, whose hands he had taught me to interpret all by myself. My personal time, that morning, was thirty-two seconds. As I sat on a cot in my flannel pyjamas (decorated with hockey players), munching on dried apricots (“just like what the astronauts eat,” said Father), and listening to the familiar clangs, thumps, and stomping noises coming from upstairs, I began to hear strange and foreign sounds that, in time, would also become familiar: Mother screaming at Father, telling him to go to hell, to fuck right off, and to do numerous other things. I didn't know it at the time, but I was listening to the fallout of the last family bomb drill that we would ever have.

“Twice a month, *every* month, for the *last eight years!* Is it too much to expect to go to bed and know that I'm going to sleep through the night without you deciding we need *yet another* practice run to the basement?”

“Bomb shelter!” cried Father. “It's a bomb shelter!” He was still swinging the cowbell out of habit, and their words floated down to where I sat punctuated by low clangs.

To his credit, Father argued well: “We can't be too careful, the world being what it is,” “A few nights of interrupted sleep is a small price to pay when nuclear war looms on the horizon,” “Your complaining would have cost us our lives if this hadn't been a drill,” and so on. Despite his artful defence, however, I realize now that he could never have won. It was 1987. The Cold

War had been dragging on for a good thirty years, and the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapsing. Mother was right to chastise him.

Their shouting soon eased and faded, and the low clang of the cowbell slowed and ceased. Their voices became too quiet for me to hear through the vent, but the outcome of the conversation was clear enough when Father came down to join me. He clapped a firm hand on my shoulder, tousled my hair, and congratulated me when I silently showed him my stopwatch. "That's a good time, Son. That's a fine time." He gathered a few of the heavy grey wool blankets from one of the cots, and I followed him upstairs and helped him make his bed for the night on the couch in the living room.

The turmoil of that morning did little to stem Father's interest in survival precautions. If anything, it only encouraged him. Survival became a leisure pursuit—a means of escaping his wife's dissatisfaction—and the more she condemned it, the more he submerged himself into his hobby.

Perhaps "hobby" is too gentle a word. Father had what I now understand to be an addictive personality. It is the character trait that creates stalkers, alcoholics, armchair quarterbacks, and bingo fanatics. Father was simply incapable of recognizing when he had gone too far, and as a result he gradually became obsessed with ensuring the safety of his family.

Father's obsession was only made worse by the fact that he was a successful real estate agent, who worked from the comfort of his own home. He thus possessed both the time and the means to indulge himself as much as he pleased. Provided that he had no appointments to show houses or meet with clients, he could call it a day whenever he wanted. This arrangement also made him my full-time babysitter while Mother worked at the hospital, which suited me just fine. I spent many happy days at Father's feet, drawing dinosaurs and zoo animals while he drafted contracts at his desk. When he went to show a house to a prospective buyer, I stayed in the back seat of the station wagon, which was always strewn with books and toys.

Father did not sell many houses during the summer months. This was not a result of market trends or low demand. On the contrary, summer is the most lucrative time of year for real estate agents. Father simply didn't feel like working very hard. When the sun passed overhead, it caused some unknown change in the air that made him realize life was too short to spend at a desk. This, too, suited me just fine, as he would spend most afternoons teaching me survival skills. By my sixth birthday I could start a fire without paper or matches, catch rabbits with snares made from copper wire, hit a tin

can at three hundred feet with a .22 rifle, and clean and cook fish.

Cloudy days were good for surveying, so we would fetch Father's Geiger counter or metal detector from the basement and make sure that the backyard had not become radioactive or filled with treasure. It never became suddenly radioactive, but tins of cookies or plastic dinosaurs with metal keys taped to their bellies often managed to bury themselves.

Hot days were good for inventory, so we would retire to the basement and see that everything was as it should be. I knew how much food and water was needed for three people to survive for a year or more, and I could change the filters in a gas mask and sharpen a hunting knife. I really shouldn't have been allowed to do any of this, but Father trusted me and never gave me any reason to doubt myself.

Rainy days were my favourite because they were good for marching. Father would put on a record, and we would form a procession of two, marching around the living room. He usually chose an Irish jig called "Croppies Lie Down," which he said was a battle song of our Irish ancestors. Around and around we marched, swinging our arms and kicking our feet, and I'm still not sure which of us enjoyed it more.

On many nights I was woken by Father's firm hand on my shoulder, and I knew instantly that it was time. "This is it," he whispered as his stopwatch clicked in the darkness. "This is the end."

We stole down the hallway, hopping and side-stepping to avoid the spots on the floor where the boards creaked, slipping silently past Mother's room. Our bomb drills had lost their fanfare and volume, but the old excitement of barreling down the stairs was replaced by a silent, conspiratorial energy—the knowledge that stealth was just as important as speed. In time I became accustomed to our secret drills, and they became as wonderful, natural, and electrifying as the old ones.

My seventh birthday began with one of these silent drills. Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union, had dismantled the country a year or so earlier, but we continued all the same. Perhaps it was out of habit, as we both sensed the slow change and tacit decay that was occurring in our family, or perhaps it was because we needed familiar things.

When we reached the basement, Father sat down on one of the cots and beckoned me to join him. From beneath the wool blanket he produced a long, sloppily-wrapped present whose shape betrayed its contents. I tore into it quickly, for I knew exactly what it was.

“I figure you’re old enough now,” he smiled. “I’ll bet you could walk into the woods with nothing but the shirt on your back and that knife and you’d be just fine. It’s top of the line.”

It was a surplus army survival knife, and it was as good as any ever made. The back edge of the eight-inch blade was lined with curved saw teeth, and the front edge was razor sharp. A buttoned pocket in the leather case held a whet stone for sharpening. A nightglow compass was set in the butt of the handle, and it unscrewed to reveal a hollow storage compartment containing a small chunk of flint, fishing line and hooks, a sewing needle, and all kinds of things that a seven-year-old boy should never possess.

Father watched proudly as I screwed and unscrewed the compass, showed him which way north was, and struck the flint across the blade to make sparks. He also passed me a stick that he had retrieved from the yard, and I sawed it in half with one edge of the blade and sharpened it to a point with the other. Satisfied with the demonstration, Father got up from the cot. “I’ll go put some coffee on, Son. It’s a big day, and we want your mother to start it off in a good mood.” He smiled, winked, and headed up the stairs, leaving me to admire my present.

When she learned about the present, Mother immediately threw it in the trash. I was upset at first, but by one o’clock that afternoon my tears had dried and I had begun to understand her motives. Just as Father had presented me with the knife because he loved me, Mother had confiscated it for the same reason. They both wanted to ensure my survival, but their methods would forever be in conflict.

“He just didn’t get it,” Mother would say to me many years later. “If what he was always waiting for ever happened—the bombs and all that—I would have wanted it to be over for all of us in the first blast. I would want to live as long as I could, happily, with the two of you, and then I would want it to be over instantly and painlessly. I never wanted what he wanted...just to survive.”

By one-fifteen I was marching around the backyard, following my nightglow compass north and then south, east and then west. I sang “Croppies Lie Down” quietly to myself, kicking up my feet as Father had taught me to do. It was only when I came to the end of the song that I noticed a noise coming from inside the house—a noise that was becoming all too familiar.

“What were you thinking? He’s just a child you *son of a bitch!*”

“That *child* can part your hair with a .22 at a hundred paces! He’s a good

man and damn responsible! If he can handle a rifle, then he can sure as hell handle a knife!”

“*Are you insane?*” This was the first time that Mother heard of my prowess as a marksman. We had never let on as to how little actual work Father and I did during the summer or that there was even a gun in the house.

I no longer remember how their fight ended, what was said, or what the weather was like that afternoon. I no longer remember which end of our property was north, what we had for dinner, or what was written on my birthday cake. The only thing I remember clearly from that day, and from the days and weeks that followed, is the sound of the war that raged within our house. It was simply one battle after another, and nobody ever won or lost.

Today I am eighteen years old, and my parents have been divorced for as long as they were married. The news came to me this morning, and by mid-afternoon I was on a bus heading home from Toronto, which is where I live. From the Orillia bus station I caught a taxi across town to where Father lives. He stays in the basement of a townhouse, and I have been going to visit him for many years, mostly on Sundays. He allowed his real estate licence to expire, and he now sells advertising for the local newspaper. He said that the business just wasn’t much fun without an “associate broker” and that the benefits at the paper are important, as he is not so young anymore. I think he realized that he may indeed grow old before the bombs fall and that a good pension is as important as a good shelter.

We have sat in his basement on many Sunday afternoons, and it often feels as though we have just finished a silent bomb drill. The basement is cluttered with many of the same artifacts and features as the last one, although cases of beer and cartons of cigarettes have become increasingly important in his preparation for nuclear confrontation. Unlike the old basement, however, this one is not much more than an elaborate tornado shelter. When I pointed this out a year or so ago, Father referred me to a wall map on which broad, sweeping circles were marked.

“You see these? They’re the most common wind patterns that occur in this area. And that’s Borden,” he said, indicating an X above Orillia. C.F.B. Borden is a military base just outside of Barrie, the closest city to the south, which is some forty kilometres away. It is the Canadian Military’s largest training base and what Father deems to be the most likely military target in

Ontario. “Now you follow these patterns and some of them cut right through Orillia. This isn’t a blast shelter! Why, no basement could be! This is a *fall-out* shelter, and the best there is! When *they* push the button, you can be damn sure I’m not going to be caught in the aftermath.”

Father no longer fears the Russians. He has turned his suspicious gaze south towards the United States. He often tells me that Canada will be annexed or invaded in my lifetime and that a bomb shelter is still an essential part of any home.

“Just look outside,” he said to me this evening. “It was never this warm in autumn when I was a boy. It was never this warm when *you* were a boy. And when Montana’s a desert, when it’s too hot to live in Florida, you think they won’t start looking up here to all this fresh water, forests, and decent temperatures? You watch, Son, you watch.”

I don’t know if I believe him, but I’m also not sure that I doubt him.

He has told me all this many times before, each time as though it was the first. He no longer recalls past conversations and repeats himself often. Like the final weeks of my parents’ marriage, I do not remember his decline in terms of events or chronology. I no longer remember the first time I knocked on his door and he answered with glazed eyes, as he did today. I do not remember when I first helped him to bed or when I first had to turn out the lights and let myself out. I only know that these things have happened many times before and that they too have become so familiar that I cannot remember them ever seeming foreign.

One Sunday afternoon a year or two ago, he told me what I should do if a day like today were to come. “We’re all set up here. You wanna talk food? I got food. Water? I got water. I know your mother got rid of all that stuff in the basement, so when you need a good bomb shelter, you come here.” He left the old basement as it was when he moved out, still convinced that we would need it someday. He was still providing for his family in case the worst ever happened.

“*But—*” he leaned in close, and his breath was bittersweet with beer and cigarette smoke. “If you don’t have a garbage bag full of canned food, I’ll shoot you on your way down the stairs. And don’t think I won’t. Don’t think I won’t.”

The aqua green duffle bag that hangs below the stairs is stuffed with nothing more than jeans, socks, and shirts, but Father still welcomed me in, as I knew he would. We talked, laughed, sang “Croppies Lie Down,” smoked

cigarettes, drank beer, and sat quietly in the comfort of each other's presence. When he fell asleep, I began to watch some of our old home movies. They are still playing on the television screen now, and the irises of my eyes finally absorb the image of us marching around the living room, swinging our arms and kicking our feet. The picture is faded and grainy, but our smiles show through the corrosion of time.

I will not stay long, as I don't believe that this is truly the end of the world. The bombs will not fall, the electricity will not fail, the sun will rise in the morning, and life will go on. I think that he, too, knows that this is not the end, that the paper will not be incinerated in an atomic blast, and that he will eventually return to work in a day or two. But we do not say this aloud because this is the moment we have been training for all our lives. We have come here for shelter because the world has changed, because it will never be the same, and because we both still need familiar things.

Father turns over and opens his eyes slightly to look at the television and then at me. He smiles and turns over once again. "Perhaps there was never a prouder moment," he says. "Perhaps not. Perhaps not."

I smile and nod in agreement, but I'm not sure if he is talking about then or now.