

**O**UR HOME IS A MODEST RANCH STYLE HOUSE that we love, although I fear it's too near Strategic Air Command Headquarters. It sits on five acres of land at the edge of our small town with green fields, tall trees and a lovely stream behind the house. I've found a way to keep my family as safe as possible by digging a fallout shelter under it.

When I was nine years old my father went away to fight the Nazis. He came home in the fall of 1944 missing most of his left arm. While I tried to give what comfort I could, he talked quietly about wading to the shore at Omaha Beach against an awful hail of bullets. I asked him why so many Germans were there shooting at him. He told me about the concrete bunkers the Germans had built. The bunkers were so strong that bombs and artillery shells couldn't destroy them and sometimes even bounced off of them. The reinforced concrete bunker that I have built and lined with sheets of lead that were intended to be roofing material will be the shield that will protect my family.

I got a job in town near my children's school so that if an alarm is sounded I can get to them quickly and take them home to our shelter. This job doesn't pay as much as my old job but my old job was too far from my family and our shelter.

Today is our weekly air raid drill. I need to pick up Ben and Michelle from school. Pulling up to the curb a little way down the block I look for them as I step out of the car. I catch sight of them in the school yard playing a game of 'Tag!' with their friends. Their faces are lit with laughter and the joy of living in the moment. They see me walking toward them and their faces close down, the laughter gone as if it had never been. As the other children notice the change they slow and stop. Their shouts and shrieks give way to a quiet that is somehow unnatural in this setting. My children walk to the car with embarrassed looks in their friend's direction and get in without saying a word.

While we're driving home I glance into the rear view mirror to look at my children. I marvel at how Ben's curly auburn cap of hair is so like his mother's and the set of his jaw reminds me of my own father. I look at Michelle and see the blue eyes and pixie-like face of my wife and feel my heart turn over in my chest. I remember how proud I was when the doctor told me I had a son and the day when I was holding Michelle in her pink blanket while she wrapped her tiny hand around my finger.

We pull up to the curb in front of the house and the kids jump out of the car, running into the house without waiting for me. I don't mind because we all know it's time to practice our air raid drill. The kids understand how important

being prepared is. They even brought home an old hand-cranked siren they found in a pile of junk behind the fire house. Ben helped me clean it and get it working again.

On my way into the house I stop in my front yard and take in the world around me. I love this time of the year. The crispness of the air as the warm humidity of September gives way to the coolness of October soothes my soul. People are cutting their lawns to prepare them for winter and the fresh smell of cut grass perfumes the air. The sky is the same indescribable blue that I saw once in a picture of Crater Lake. The poplar and elm trees are putting on their fall colors. Watching a golden leaf spiral to the ground reminds me of playing on the tire swing with my brother. We would swing as high as we could and jump off into piles of leaves that our father had raked together. Daring each other to swing higher and higher, we strove to see who could go highest without caring who won. Thinking of those exuberant and care-free days makes me wonder, where does innocence go? Do you lose it or is it taken from you?

Stepping into the house I look at the bits and pieces that tell the story of our life together. The sofa and love seat that Sara and I bought for our first anniversary takes up most of the living room. In front of the sofa is a coffee table Sara's folks had given to us so the room wouldn't look so bare. Pictures of family decorate the walls. On a side table is a misshapen ceramic cup Ben had made and proudly presented to me on Father's Day.

Moving to the door of the kitchen I see Sara. She hasn't noticed me yet and her face looks tired and a little sad. The laugh lines at the corners of her eyes are familiar but when did she get those worry lines across her forehead and beside her mouth? Why do her shoulders slump as if she is carrying a heavy load? She turns toward me and smiles the smile that lights her face like a sunrise but the sadness doesn't leave her eyes. She's dressed in the blue cashmere turtleneck sweater I gave her and denim slacks. Seeing her reminds me of the first day I met her. She had gone to the lake with friends to learn how to water ski. Her eyes were bright with laughter as the wind blew her auburn curls across her face. Her athletic body was speckled with drops of water that highlighted her curves. I had thought love at first sight was a myth, but I was wrong.

I don't hear the children and I ask, "Where are the kids?"

Sara turns toward the window above the sink that looks out over the back yard, "They went straight outside when they got home."

Worry makes my heart beat faster as I look for them among the trees. "I hope they didn't go far. They know we have a drill planned for today."

I hear a tremor in Sara's voice as she says "Darling, do we have to go through the drill again this week? We've done it so many times already."

“Yes, we need to do it again.” She drops her eyes to look at the floor, the curtain of her auburn hair hiding her face. “I have to know that you and the children will be safe.”

I pull our siren from the closet and Sara hunches her shoulders as if preparing to be battered by the noise. Cranking the handle on the siren makes it howl like some mythical beast announcing the apocalypse. The kids appear from the direction of the stream walking slowly toward the house. What’s happened to their enthusiasm? They used to make this such a wonderful game. I call to them and tell them to hurry. If it was a real emergency they may not have much time to reach the shelter. My heart begins to trip like a hammer as my mind overlays this view of my children with the devastation I saw at Hiroshima. After I graduated from high school I joined the army and was sent to Korea. While we were in transit my buddy, Corky, and I spent a month or so in Japan. During a weekend liberty we took a train south through a busy, industrious countryside to look at what was left of the city of Hiroshima. I thought I would feel righteous and triumphant at this evidence of my country’s power. Instead I looked at the barren, wasted landscape that had once been a thriving city full of life and families and felt sick to my stomach. We didn’t stay very long. In my mind I could see my children walking among the dead and barren trees, the scorched foundations of wood and paper houses that once sheltered families and the burned out hulks of brick buildings that somehow survived the blast. The children walk a little faster but their reluctance is obvious. My fear makes me want to scream at them to run.

My terror fades as Ben and Michelle walk into the kitchen. They move to stand behind Sara, almost as if they’re afraid to be too close to me. The three of them stand there, waiting for me, as if they’re not sure what they’re supposed to do next.

Puzzled, I say “Come on, guys. You heard the siren. It’s time to go down into the shelter.” Herding them to the entrance of the shelter, I step around them and raise the hatch. They climb down the ladder reluctantly, as if it’s the entrance to hell instead of shelter from destruction.

When I began to build the shelter my children were fascinated. They thought it was great fun to disguise the entrance to the shelter in the closet where we kept our coats and winter boots. They pretended it was the entrance to a secret pirate cave or a moon rocket. Climbing up and down the iron rungs of the ladder, they kept me company as I worked. Now it feels as though I have to force them to come into the shelter. I thought they understood what we were doing here. What’s changed?

Following my family down the entrance I work the mechanism that closes it. Even though it has always worked as I intended I still feel pleased at the smooth way it functions. Reaching the main living area at the bottom of the ladder I see Sara sitting at our table. She is watching the children as they sit on one of the beds that occupy the sleeping corner.

“Come on, Ben.” I say while signaling him to follow. “We have to check the equipment to make sure it’s working. Sara, you and Michelle are supposed to be checking our provisions.” They hesitate for a moment but move to do their tasks.

I’ve tapped into our well and installed a hand-powered pump for the water. I don’t think the electricity will survive the attack. I’ve also hooked the water to the toilet so we’ll be able to flush things into the septic system. Ben works the handle of the pump while I check the flow. The water and toilet are in perfect working order.

I built book shelves down here. If books survive so will the knowledge in them. Hopefully they will make the lives of those generations that come after us a little bit easier. I’ve included many board and card games that will help us pass the time until it might be safe to emerge from our shelter. Both of the kids made sure their favorite games were included.

The next room over has a small cooking area and storage for as many canned goods and food stuffs with a long shelf life as I could fit in here. Ben and I check the stove while the girls make sure none of the food is past its expiration date. Sara doesn’t seem as diligent about checking the food as she was in the beginning. Granted, she probably knows which supplies are here and their expiration but she should still take this more seriously.

Ben follows me into the space furthest from the living area where I’ve placed a rack of batteries and the generator. There is also oxygen bottles stored in case they’re needed. The batteries will be used for light at first. I’ve routed the exhaust of the generator outside. We will be able to run the generator and recharge our batteries without the fear of carbon monoxide poisoning. I try to get Ben involved in checking our equipment but he’s moving so slowly that it’s just easier to do it myself.

At the far end of this room is our escape tunnel in case the entrance gets sealed. I used reinforced concrete pipe sections to create the tunnel. It leads to our stream and exits in a spot that is secluded from prying eyes. I’m storing cans of gasoline and kerosene there for the generator and stove. It should be safe enough and still be handy for use while being kept away from the living area in case of fire.

Turning back toward the main living space I notice with a start of surprise that Ben is no longer with me. When did he leave? Walking back through the shelter to the living area I find my family sitting quietly together. Sara is sitting on one of the beds with an arm around each of the children, giving them comfort as they lean into her. Why would they need comforting?

Michelle looks up at me and I can see that she has a question. “Daddy, what’s ‘tomic war?”

How do you explain to a seven year old the viciousness of nuclear warfare?

“Atomic war is when people use bombs that give off a certain type of energy, kind of like light.” Pictures of people with radiation sickness and flash burns flit through my mind like a grisly slide show. “The energy can make people sick enough that they die.”

A tiny vertical line appears between her brows as she tries to relate this new information to what she has experienced in her short life.

Ben looks at me with a troubled expression. “Dad? My best friend, Tommy, doesn’t have a bomb shelter. Do you think he could come down here with us?”

Michelle pipes in, “I want Trixie to come, too!”

My children look at me with hope and trust. I was afraid this moment would come. Looking at Sara for support I see pain in her eyes. How do you explain the logistics of dwindling food supply and atomic half-life to children who seem to think you can give them the moon if they ask?

“I’m so sorry, kids. We just don’t have enough room or food for more people.”

Tears fill Michelle’s eyes and Ben looks stubborn as he prepares to fight this as hard as he can. His voice shaded with panic Ben asks, “Why not, Dad? He’s not very big and won’t take up much room. I’ll share my food and bed with him. I promise!”

Sniffing back tears Michelle adds, “Trixie isn’t very big, either! Please, Daddy?”

Trying to stay calm I say, “I need the two of you to understand. If I say Tommy and Trixie can come down here then others will want to come, too. Who do I say ‘no’ to? If I say OK to Tommy can I say no to his friend Billy? Where does it stop?”

Sara looks at me and shakes her head. “Please don’t do this” she says quietly, “You’re frightening them.”

Is the sadness I see in her eyes for the life we hoped for and seems never to be or for me and what my fear has turned me into? I can’t think about that now. I have to protect my family the best way I know how.

Ben decides to give it one more try. “Dad, who will I play with? I don’t think I want to be down here if it means leaving my friends.”

Fear fuels my anger and frustration. Why can’t they understand?! Why don’t they see that I’m trying to save their lives and give them a future! I lose my temper and snap at him, “I said ‘NO’ and I mean ‘NO’! Now I don’t want to hear another word from you about this!”

Sara stands and in a strained voice says, “Please let us out now.”

Climbing the ladder I engage the mechanism to raise the hatch. I notice that it works perfectly once again. Why can't my family work as perfectly? Sara and the kids follow me up into the house and the children go outside. The world above ground is almost too bright to look at after having spent the last few hours surrounded by the dark gray walls of the shelter. Outside the sunset is painting the sky in pinks and golds and the yard with golden highlights and purple shadows. A warbler is singing in the trees but somehow it sounds far away and unreal.

I watch my children walk away. Anger and resentment are in every line of my son's nine year old body as he casts bitter glances back at me. Michelle holds his hand as a tear, sparkling in the fading sunlight, falls from her chin. Sara watches them disappear around the corner of the garage. She turns to me, her face strained and pale. Tears glisten in her eyes and one traces its way down the face I've loved since the first time I saw it.

"Please, Darling, please. Stop this before it destroys us."

I can't stop. How can I make her understand? I reach my hand to touch her face and the feel of her warm, soft skin evokes memories of a first kiss, a magical wedding night, a lifetime of love. Protecting my family, with my life if necessary, is the most important thing I can do. I use my thumb to brush away the tear.

"I love you. I have to protect you." Turning away I walk back to my study to listen to the radio for the announcement of a missile launch and watch the starlit sky for fiery trails.

