



FALLOUT

TODD STRASSER

1

I wake to a hand on my shoulder. Dad's voice is urgent. "Get up, Scott!" The light in the bedroom is on, and I squint up into his face. Dad's eyes are wide, and he's shaking me hard, not gently, the way he usually does when he wants to wake me.

"Up! Now!"

I rub my eyes. An inner clock tells me that it's the middle of the night. My heart starts to race with alarm. "What . . . ?"

"We're being attacked." He swivels to my little brother Sparky's bed. "Edward!"

Attacked? As my brain claws toward alertness, I hear sirens wailing in the distance. Not the melodic bursts

of code directing volunteer firemen to a fire. These are shrill swooping wails.

Sparky groans and tries to roll over. Instead of arguing, Dad scoops him up, blankets and all. "Put me down!" Still half asleep, Sparky kicks as Dad cradles him and turns to me.

"Come on!"

Barefoot, heart heaving with panic, I race after him out onto the cold hall tiles, where we nearly crash into Mom, who's carrying an armful of things she's just gotten from the kitchen.

"Hurry!" Dad barks, and we scurry down the hall. In the dark playroom, he opens the closet and, with a loud clatter, sweeps away whatever toys and games lie on top of the square metal trapdoor. Outside, the sirens continue to blare.

"What's going on?" Sparky cries, awake now.

Mom dumps the things from the kitchen on the floor and pulls him close. "It's okay. Don't be scared."

But now loud banging sounds echo down the hall from the front of the house.

I gasp. "What's that?"

Without answering, Dad yanks the metal trapdoor up and points down into the square of darkness. "Go!"

I can't see a thing. "How?"

Crash! Glass smashes somewhere in the house.

"What's happening?" Sparky wails.

“It’s okay,” Mom says soothingly. Then to Dad: “Hurry!”

I feel Dad’s arms pick me up and lower me into the emptiness. My feet dangle in the dark air. Frightened that he’s about to let go, I dig my hands into his arms. “I can’t see!”

“Feel the rungs with your feet!” he commands.

I find a cold metal bar with my toes just as footsteps slap into the playroom. It’s Janet, our maid who stays over one night a week. She’s pulling a light-blue robe closed, and her eyes are moons of terror.

“Go down!” Dad barks at me.

“Richard?” From somewhere in the house, a man’s voice calls through the dark.

The metal rungs hurt the bottoms of my bare feet as I lower myself. The dark air in the shelter is cool and damp and smells like mildew. Suddenly boxes and bags of things shower down, bouncing off my head and arms, and falling into the shadows below. I cry out in surprise, even though it doesn’t really hurt. Already Mom’s feet are on the rungs just above me.

“Hurry!” Dad yells.

“Ow!” Sparky cries, and I wonder if Dad accidentally banged him into something as he tried to lower him through the trapdoor.

One of my feet touches the cold concrete floor; the other steps on a box that collapses with a crunch.

“In there!” a man’s voice shouts.

Above me, Mom yells, “Careful, Edward!”

Suddenly there’s scratching and grunting overhead. Sparky cries out, and Mom gasps loudly. Something big is plummeting down, and I barely have time to jump out of the way before Mom crashes to the floor with a horrible, crunching thud, Sparky on her chest.

“Mom!” A terrified cry tears through my throat. “Sparky!”

two

“Me could eat horse, Kemo Sabe,” Freak O’ Nature said in the diction of Tonto, the Lone Ranger’s Indian sidekick. Freak O’ Nature’s real name was Norman Freeman, but his friends called him Freak O’ Nature because . . . well, because that’s what he was.

It was the last week of fifth grade, and he, Ronnie, and I were lounging on his lawn listening to Freak O’ Nature’s black transistor radio, which lay on the grass broadcasting the game between the Yankees and the Cleveland Indians. Mickey Mantle, playing for the first time after a month on the disabled list, had just smashed a come-from-behind pinch-hit home run to put the Yanks ahead 9-7.

“Who wants to bet they still lose?” asked Ronnie, wearing a colorful Indian madras short-sleeve shirt that was the current height of style.

“Me hungry,” said Freak O’ Nature, who sat cross-legged, all sharp, bony angles, with brown hair, freckles, and thin metal wires across his upper and lower teeth from his bite plates.

Lying on my back, feeling the grass tickle my neck and ears, I gazed up at the puffy white clouds in the blue sky. The June sun warmed our faces and arms. In a few days, school would end, and we would have all summer to play baseball and swim and have fun.

On the radio, the Indians’ pitcher Gary Bell got Clete Boyer out on a ground ball and Bobby Richardson swinging. But it didn’t matter. The Mick was back, and the Yanks were winning.

“Want a Sara Lee cheesecake?” Ronnie asked as he sucked on a stem of clover he’d plucked from the lawn. He was a stocky, muscular kid with black hair greased back along the sides of his head into a ducktail, while the front hung down in a spit curl.

The thought of sweet, creamy cheese filling and graham-cracker crust made my stomach rumble with anticipation. Even though it was only an hour before dinnertime and a sure bet to ruin my appetite, I asked, “How?”

“There’s a million of ‘em in Linda’s garage.”

Ronnie might have been exaggerating, but we got the point. The houses in our neighborhood didn't have basements, so people put freezers in their garages and filled them with food.

"You mean, steal it?" I sat up and tugged nervously at the hair behind my ear. I'd never stolen anything . . . except for the stuff it was okay to steal, like cookies from the kitchen when Mom wasn't around and our Halloween candy from the shopping bag Dad hid in his closet so Sparky and I wouldn't eat it all at once — but really, we suspected, so he could eat some of it, too.

"It's not stealing," Ronnie insisted. "We know Linda. Besides, you ever looked in their freezer? It's so full, they'll never notice if one cheesecake is gone."

Linda Lewandowski had four brothers and sisters, so it made sense that there might be more food in the freezer than her mother could keep track of. But even if there'd been enough cheesecakes to fill Yankee Stadium, that still didn't make stealing right.

Freak O' Nature gave me an uncertain look. "What you think, Kemo Scott?"

"What if we get caught?" I asked.

Ronnie plucked another clover from the lawn and sucked on it pensively. "What difference will it make? We could all be dead tomorrow."

3

From above come grunts, banging, and scraping—the sounds of a scuffle. “Richard, let us in!” someone shouts frantically. “Don’t let us die!”

Petrified with fear, I crouch on the concrete floor beside Janet, who climbed down after Mom fell. The still forms of Mom and Sparky lie in the dark while Dad clings to the metal rungs and tries to pull the trapdoor closed. But people on the other side are trying to pull it open.

The light’s gone on in the playroom, and the shelter brightens each time the trapdoor rises a few inches, then darkens again when Dad manages to yank it down. With

each flash of light, I glimpse Mom on her back, one arm stretched out, one leg bent at the knee, the other propped against the wall, Sparky sprawled on top of her.

My brother begins to whimper. Janet draws him off Mom and into her arms. I can't tell if he's hurt, but at least he's moving and making sounds. Unlike Mom, who lies perfectly still.

The trapdoor rises enough to let in the wail of sirens. Someone shouts a curse. Dad's feet are wedged into the metal rungs. His teeth are gritted with exertion as he struggles to close the door. I want to beg him to let the others in. But I don't because this is something I've been scared of ever since he first told me about the shelter, since I realized we were the only family on the block who had one. What if there are dozens of people up there? What if more are coming? What if they all try to squeeze in until those of us at the bottom are crushed to death?

The trapdoor rises. A thin metal tube slides in and swings around as if trying to hit Dad's arms and break his grip. It's a pole from the badminton net.

"Scott, the rope!" Dad shouts.

My eyes meet Janet's. "Do what he says," she tells me.

I look up at Dad. "Where?"

"On the wall!"

We're in a narrow corridor lined with cinder blocks. From a previous visit down here, I know that the wall he's talking about is around the corner, in the shelter itself.

But the small amounts of light seeping in from above don't reach that far. "I can't see!" I yell.

"The light!" Dad shouts. "On the string from the ceiling!"

I scuttle into the pitch-black shelter. Stopping in what I think should be the center of the room, I wave my arms around until I feel a string and pull. A lightbulb bursts on, and in the glare I see the kitty-corner double-decker bunks and wooden shelves lined with food and other supplies. On the wall, a coiled rope is looped over a hook. I grab it. Back out in the narrow corridor, Janet is comforting Sparky, who's staring fearfully up while Dad struggles. Mom still hasn't moved. Something dark is pooling under her head.

A tennis racket slides through the gap between the trapdoor and the closet floor. They're using it as a lever to pry the door open. Dad reaches down and grabs the coil of rope from my hands. Now, in addition to the badminton pole and tennis racket, fingers appear along the edge of the trapdoor. First a few, then more and more, turning white around the fingernails as they strain to pull upward.

The trapdoor starts to rise. The rope falls to the floor beside Mom as Dad tightens his grip on the latch. He grits his teeth and struggles, but the hands from above pull the door higher, and through the gap I see bare

feet, pajama-clad legs, the hems of robes . . . then faces peering in — tight lips and clenched teeth like Dad’s. The door rises another inch. Dad is being stretched, the skin of his stomach showing between his pajama top and bottoms.

“Uhhh!” he grunts, and lets go.

The trapdoor flies open and light spills in, accompanied by yelps and thuds as the people who were pulling fall backward. The badminton pole and tennis racket tumble down on us with dull thunks. Janet and Sparky cower. Mom doesn’t react. Familiar faces crowd around the square opening above. Ronnie and his father. Mr. McGovern and Paula . . .

Clinging to the rungs in the wall, Dad gapes up at them. “There’s no room,” he protests meekly.

The faces grow determined and grim.

“Go down, Ronnie!” Mr. Shaw shouts.

“But Scott’s dad said —”

“Go!” Mr. Shaw yells.

Ronnie’s bare foot feels for the top rung. Dad reaches up and swats at it.

“He’s stopping me!” Ronnie cries.

Ronnie’s feet rise as if he’s flying away. They’re replaced by bigger feet. Dad swipes at them, but the feet kick back. Legs in blue pajamas force Dad down the rungs.

“You’ll kill us all!” he protests.

Ronnie’s dad answers with a curse and takes another step down.

“Watch out for Mom!” I cry at Dad, who momentarily freezes when he sees her crumpled below.

Meanwhile, Mr. Shaw and Ronnie are coming down, while others crowd around the trapdoor waiting their turn. Dad hops from the bottom rung, trying not to step on Mom.

“Get her into the shelter!” he yells at Janet as he quickly slides his hands under Mom’s shoulders. Janet grabs Mom’s ankles, and together they maneuver her around the shield wall. Sparky runs into my arms, his heart beating as fast as a hamster’s as we follow Dad and Janet. My last glimpse is of Mr. Shaw helping Ronnie off the rungs while more people climb down. The nightmare is coming true. We’re going to be crushed.

four

You never knew what might come out of Ronnie's mouth, but on that June afternoon, our heads filled with baseball and cheesecake, the suggestion that we could all be dead tomorrow was unexpectedly jarring.

"What are you talking about?" Freak O' Nature asked him in a normal voice.

"Nuclear war," I said, since that was the only thing that could result in all three of us being dead by the morning. All year long, the Communist threat had been growing as the Russians spread their influence in Asia and South America and even to a little country called Cuba, which was an island somewhere south of Florida ruled by a

Commie named Castro who had a scruffy beard, wore a green army uniform, and smoked cigars.

“My dad heard the Ruskies are sending ships filled with fighter jets, bombers, and missiles to Cuba,” Ronnie said. “And if we try to stop them, it’ll be war.”

The Russians were evil. Their chubby bald-headed leader, Nikita Khrushchev, had crooked teeth and an ugly gap between the front two, which showed that Russians didn’t even believe in orthodontia. And if that didn’t make him anti-American enough, there was the time he’d come to the United Nations and banged his shoe on the rostrum, which proved beyond a doubt that the Commies were unpredictable, violent, and crazy enough to blow us all up.

Clover stem squeezed between his lips, Ronnie pushed himself up to his feet and reached down, offering me his hand. “Come on, let’s eat.”

I felt my stomach tighten at the thought of the proposed criminal enterprise.

“Well?” Ronnie’s hand was still out. I grabbed it, just like always.

Freak O’ Nature scooped up the transistor radio and sprang to his feet. He was the only kid we knew who could go from sitting Indian style to standing without using his hands, this being one more piece of evidence of his general freak o’ naturedness.

We walked along the sidewalk past our neighbors’

homes, each on a quarter acre of property with a front lawn just large enough for a bunch of eleven-year-old boys to play touch football.

As the three of us neared Linda's house, I couldn't help wondering how Ronnie expected to get a cheesecake out of the freezer without one of the numerous Lewandowski children, or Mrs. Lewandowski herself, catching us.

Relief washed through me when the Lewandowskis' garage came into view. "It's closed," I announced, trying not to let on how much better I felt now that I wouldn't have to help Ronnie steal.

"Because they're not home," said Ronnie. "Linda told me she was going to the doctor this afternoon."

The Lewandowskis had a station wagon, and whenever Mrs. Lewandowski took one of her kids somewhere, all the others had to go as well. It was not unusual to see their car weaving erratically down the street, Mrs. Lewandowski steering with her left hand while reaching back to smack one misbehaving child or another with her right.

"So . . . what're we gonna do?" I bit my lower lip nervously.

"Go in there and get us a cheesecake," Ronnie replied, as if the answer were obvious. He stopped at the end of the Lewandowskis' driveway and gazed at the house, which was the color of chocolate pudding.

My queasiness leaped up a notch; intentionally

opening a garage door seemed to imply a greater degree of juvenile delinquency than merely wandering in. I reached behind my ear and took hold of a few more hairs. "You mean, open the garage door?"

"No, Scott, I'm going to walk right through it like that scientist in *4D Man*."

"Nothing can stop him," Freak O' Nature said in a deep ominous voice, quoting from the TV commercial currently promoting the movie. "A man in the fourth dimension is in . . . de . . . struc . . . ti . . . ble."

By now my reluctance had risen to the level of near-paralysis. "You sure about this?"

"What's the big deal?" Ronnie asked impatiently. "The Lewandowskis are our neighbors. We share stuff all the time."

"But we ask first," I said.

"If they were here, I'd ask." Ronnie took a few steps up the driveway, then stopped and looked back at us. "You guys aren't *chicken*, are you?"

5

Leaving a smudged trail of blood on the concrete floor, Dad and Janet get Mom to a bunk. Ronnie and Mr. Shaw, in their pajamas, stumble into the shelter and look around. Mrs. Shaw, in a pink bathrobe, arrives next. From around the shield wall come shouts of people urging each other to hurry and go down.

Dad spins to face Mr. Shaw. "We're all going to die," he growls as Paula comes in with tears running down her face. "There're already too many. There won't be enough food or water for all of us."

Mr. Shaw and my father face each other for an instant, then march back around the shield wall. Meanwhile

Sparky's still holding on to me, and I can't stop looking at Mom, now cradled in Janet's arms, and wishing she'd move. Ronnie and Paula also stare. Mrs. Shaw pulls both of them to her.

On the other side of the shield wall, Dad and Mr. Shaw shout that there are too many people. Loud grunts and curses follow, as if there's a fight. A man shouts, "My daughter's in there!" In the shelter, Paula cries out, "Daddy!" Her sobs grow louder, and Mrs. Shaw hugs her and says it's going to be okay. But that can't be true. There's a nuclear war and Mom's bleeding and too many people are already in the shelter and more are trying to get in.

The fighting and yelling grow louder. Sparky's grip on me tightens as he pleads, "Make it stop!"

Mr. McGovern staggers around the shield wall with a long red scratch across his cheek. Paula breaks away from Mrs. Shaw, but before she gets to him, there's a sudden bright flash of light as if someone on the other side of the shield wall took a photograph.

A woman's scream pierces the air.

The bulb in the ceiling goes out.

Everything turns dark.

The sirens in the distance stop.

"What happened?" Sparky asks anxiously in the inky void.

Clang! On the other side of the shield wall, the

trapdoor slams shut, and I hear a clank as if a bolt has been thrown.

It is pitch-black in the shelter.

The momentary silence is broken by Paula's sobs, then into the darkness come ragged breaths — Dad's and Mr. Shaw's. From around the shield wall come thuds of fists drumming against the trapdoor. A muffled female voice cries hysterically, "Richard! Richard!"

It's horrible. I cover my ears, but it doesn't help. More thuds and frantic begging join in. "Please!" "For the love of God!" "Don't let us die!"

"I'm scared!" Sparky wails. In the blackness, his sobs join Paula's.

"Don't listen," Mrs. Shaw gasps, as if such a thing might be possible.

Despite the panicked shouts coming from the other side of the trapdoor, there is a strange stillness in the shelter.

"Scott?" Dad says somberly somewhere in the dark.

"Dad?" Ronnie says at the same time his mother says, "Steven?"

"I'm here," Mr. Shaw answers, breathing heavily.

Loud clanks and thumps fill our ears as those left above beat at the trapdoor. But it is made of quarter-inch iron plate. Nothing short of a bazooka could blast through it.

"Make it stop," Sparky pleads.

But it doesn't. There's no getting away from the agonized cries of those who've been locked out. Stomach cramped, heart racing, I fight back tears and wish the banging and shouting would go away.

Now there's a new, more distant sound . . . growing steadily louder like thunder. Then a roar, and one last awful scream that disappears into deafening clatter and crashing. In the dark below, I cower over Sparky and imagine something like a tornado above obliterating everything in its path.

It rumbles over us, followed by a few muffled thumps. And then . . . quiet.

Fallout

Todd Strasser

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