

THERE is a song I was taught in school during the 1950s titled “Duck and Cover.” It was supposed to help us remember what to do in the event of a nuclear attack. More importantly, it was supposed to convince us that there could be a safe place in a world at war. The atomic bomb would fall and we would duck and cover and it would be OK. There wasn’t a child in the room who didn’t know this was a baldfaced lie, the height of adult mendacity — as the older boys said, “Bullshit.”

During recess, we sat in the dirt by a chain-link fence at the far edge of the school grounds and talked about what would really happen when the bomb fell. The consensus was we would all be dead. For some of us it would be immediate. For others it would be slower and, we feared, more agonizing. These would get to live a little while before their skin fell off and their hair fell out and they died. (We didn’t know yet about cancer twenty and thirty years down the line.)

In my seventh-grade science class we had to crawl under our desks during bomb drills. The teacher made the girls pull their skirts over their heads for protection. We boys saw the girls’ underwear and wondered how pulling their skirts over their heads would help the girls survive the atomic bomb. Someone complained, and one day the science teacher was no longer among us. Later I learned that even a single layer of fabric could shield one’s skin from the first blast effects of the bomb. In Japan, bomb victims were terribly burned except where their clothing had covered their skin.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead believed the entire world could be divided into two categories of people: those born before the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and those born after. If you were born before, you believed that life would go on. No matter how hard things got, no matter what depths of poverty or deprivation you experienced, life would go on. The sun and the moon, the deep blue sky, the birds that sang outside your window not caring if you noticed — it would all go on.

Those born after the bomb do not suffer this delusion. We know there is no safe place in this world we have made.



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Colorado developer had built a housing project in which every home came with its own bomb shelter. In Phoenix, where we lived, the man across the street had paid three thousand dollars to have a bomb shelter dug below his cinder-block house.

I heard that Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had taken off his shoe and banged it on the table to make his point to the American government. (I don’t think this occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis, but in my memory, the two events have ended up together.) This impressed me: the leader of the second-most-powerful nation on earth took off his shoe to yell at the Americans. When the end came, I imagined, the air would be filled with millions of shoes, falling from the clouds onto my head. Shoes would fly across the sky and blot out the sun.

My father couldn’t have come up with three thousand dollars if he’d sold his soul. Besides, he’d already sold his soul — sold it to the Man — to get a job working on the assembly

MY father felt badly because he couldn’t offer protection to his family. A man’s job is to work hard and take care of his wife and children; that’s what my father believed. He’d dropped out of school in the seventh grade and learned how to work. When he came home from World War II, he got a job in the Crown Zellerbach paper mill on the Willamette River. Good union wage. Bought a little two-bedroom house. I was born, and then my sister. My mother didn’t work outside the home, and my father’s wages covered everything. We went to the movies and rode the streetcar into downtown Portland to go shopping. But my father suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, and we moved to Arizona because the doctors assured him the dry heat there would help. No jobs. No union. My mother went to work. My father found work wherever he could. We got by.

Then the Cuban Missile Crisis came. The Russians had placed missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba, and the Americans had told them to remove the missiles, or else. The end of the world felt close and personal once again. I found myself humming “Duck and Cover.” I wondered what on earth we could do.

The idea was that, to save ourselves, we’d go underground. A

line in an aluminum-extrusion mill. When the mill laid him off, he sold his soul again to get a job in a cabinet shop. When the shoes fell from the sky in my mind, they were filled with sawdust.

One of the first poems I wrote as an adult was called “Shelter” — a very literary title, in that no shelter would be provided. In the poem, my father is out one summer evening watering the lawn. He sees our neighbor standing in his yard across the street, staring at the sky. The neighbor has a rifle. He says hello to my father and begins to explain that a bomb shelter is designed to provide the requisite amount of filtered air, bottled water, and emergency food for one family: no more. So, however hard it may be, a man would have to be firm: when the bomb fell, he’d hustle his family down there and close the door on the rest of the world.

“Nobody else,” the man says. “The goddamn dog’s staying up top, and the neighbors are, too. There’s no room to take more people. You let extras in, and we’re all gonna die.”

At this point the neighbor lifts his rifle to his shoulder, takes aim at some distant star, and fires. “God damn it. Dead.”

I think the rifle might have been what galvanized my father. He’d never had much to do with guns outside of his experience as a tail gunner in a B-25 medium-range bomber during World War II, and a tail gunner never gets close to what he shoots. But that rifle in our neighbor’s hands — that was close.

The people who knew about these things said that if you couldn’t build a bomb shelter, the next best thing was a central room in your house — a room with no windows. So my father set up a makeshift bomb shelter in our bathroom. It was a small room. If somebody sat on the toilet and somebody else in the tub, there was enough room for two more people to stand in front of the sink. They could look at themselves in the mirror. If their skin should happen to fall off, they could watch it happen.

The dirty-clothes basket that had sat by the toilet was gone. In its place was a cardboard box filled with canned food and jars of water — those institutional-sized jars they use in restaurant kitchens. My mother scrubbed them out and filled them with tap water and set them in the bathroom. You never knew what might help you to survive.

THEY were lying to us. Who were “they?” To this day I can’t quite figure that out. My schoolteachers? The newscasters on television? The governor? The Red Cross and the Civil Defense? The president? Did the president believe he was going to survive when the bombs started zinging around the planet? Perhaps they’d whisk him off to some secret air base, where he’d live in underground splendor. The wealthy and the powerful take care of themselves.

But what about when they came back up — the president and our neighbor with his rifle? The president could preside over a nation of sawdust-filled shoes, and the neighbor could be the first postnuclear secretary of defense.

Maybe they lied to us in a sincere effort to help us feel safe. If so, it didn’t work. The most enduring, most powerful result of lying is that nobody believes you about anything ever again.

You lied to me then, so how am I supposed to know you’re not lying now? No matter how sincere, an untrustworthy person cannot give us a feeling of security.

In early adulthood, I faced this problem in the form of President Richard Nixon. Nixon had been elected in part because he claimed he had a plan that would allow for an honorable end to the Vietnam War. He then oversaw the secret bombing of Cambodia. Entire mountain ranges were pounded to gravel, rivers ripped from their courses, rare tigers blown apart, human beings lifted into the air and dropped back, dead. President Nixon denied all accusations concerning American bombing raids. He lied from beginning to end. Perhaps he thought those lies might get us out of the war or make the American people feel safe. If so, he was wrong on both counts.

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