HARRY WILSON

Fallout

a short story by PAMELA SCHOENEWALDT

I used to be an expert on the atom bomb in the late fifties, thanks to *Junior Scholastic* magazine. Everyone in Mrs. Thompson's fifth-grade class subscribed. We had to. The American Legion paid for the poor kids' subscriptions so we could all be guardians of freedom, equally informed and watchful. The first line of defense in the Cold War, Mrs. Thompson reminded us, was information. So when our *Junior Scholastic*s arrived, we put aside our other lessons. The theme for May was "Nuclear War and You," with recipes for Atomic Cookies and a joke column titled "It's a Blast!" Mrs. Thompson made Ronnie, our slow kid, read the first joke:

Dan: How did you get that black eye?
Sam: I'm a Cold War victim.
Dan: How so?
Sam: I got hit by a guided muscle.

Mrs. Thompson laughed, then most of the class laughed, then Ronnie laughed loudly, so we'd think he got the joke. I got it fine, but I figured I didn't need to laugh until Mrs. Thompson looked my way. I wasn't fast enough.

"Helen, why is the rest of the class laughing?"

"Because it's a pun: guided missile, guided muscle."

"So why didn't you laugh?"

When I said I didn't laugh because I didn't think that guided missiles were funny, I heard murmurs of "Yeah," and "For sure," but Mrs. Thompson never let rebellions swell. Her gaze stilled the room as she rose heavily from her desk and planted herself in front of the blackboard: "Wouldn't you agree, class, that a sense of humor helps us walk the Road of Life?"

Subdued and a little confused, everyone nodded.

"In fact, class, *experts* tell us that a good sense of humor equals good mental adjustment." She wrote this equation on the board in her impeccable cursive hand: "Good sense of humor = Good mental adjustment." My traitor classmates regarded me with pity and contempt. "Helen," asked Mrs. Thompson, "would you *please* work on your sense of humor?"

I muttered that I would.

"I'm glad. We're *all* glad for Helen. Aren't we, class?"

Yes, the class was glad for me. When Mrs. Thompson erased the board, the fat in her arms swayed, then stopped as she turned, considered our worthiness, and finally confided: "Class, if it wasn't for my sense of humor when my husband died, I couldn't have gone on as I did. Everybody said so. Now turn to page 19, 'Life behind the Iron Curtain.' "

During the shuffling of pages, I pictured Mrs. Thompson's great body rocking with laughter as she gaily tossed dirt on Mr. Thompson's grave and then set off firmly down the Road of Life, still chuckling while friends, family, and experts all nodded their approval.

On page 19 we read about twelve-year-old Olga, who lived in the Ukraine. Olga rose before dawn six days a week, ate black bread and coffee (never pancakes, eggs, or Frosted Flakes), then trudged miles to frigid schoolrooms where never-smiling teachers grilled her in a dozen subjects. After school, instead of sports, she "chose" Young Pioneer meetings sponsored by the Communist Party, where leaders coached her in political self-criticism and helped her scrutinize the loyalty of neighbors, friends, and family members. Then a long, cold walk home for dinners of cabbage soup and black bread with occasional boiled meat, followed by homework (no television) until midnight in the cold, cramped kitchen, striving to master calculus and thus bring glory to the Soviet State.

"I might note, class," Mrs. Thompson interjected, "that *some* young Americans didn't complete their math work sheets today. Apparently Olga sees homework as an *opportunity*."

Junior Scholastic lessons were always this way: constant jolts from jokes, to fear, to disgust for a nation of tattletales and goody-two-shoes. Without democracy, would this be our fate?

In the summer, Olga worked hard on a state-run beet farm, which her grandfather had owned before the revolution. She dreamed of someday visiting Disneyland, but, barring miracles, we knew this was impossible. After we'd read Olga's story, Mrs. Thompson had us open our Cold War notebooks and list ten ways our lives would change if the Iron Curtain fell around New Jersey. I started my list:

1) Cabbage soup.
2) No TV.
3) Study calculus.
4) No vacations. Beet farms.
5) Inform on parents. They go to Siberia.

I stopped writing. My sweaty hands made the blue lines blur.

Our last exercise, "Know the Bomb," gave us four new vocabulary words: *half-life, implode, firestorm* and *radiation sickness.* Finally recess came. On the playground, Jimmy Enser told me in a whisper that I was right, guided missiles weren't funny, but his father still thought my father was a jackass.

Jimmy lived next door, and his father was building a fallout shelter that took up half their backyard. "It's a personal thing, what a man does to protect his family," Mr. Enser told me one Saturday, and no, he didn't need any help with the wiring, even if my father was a master electrician.

"He thinks if I help him," my father said, "I'll want in his shelter when the big one comes." We watched Mr. Enser grimly fighting tangled loops of electrical wire. A steel door lay on the grass, ready to install, double thick with a deadbolt as big as my wrist.

"Suppose we *did* want in?" I asked.

My father shrugged. "Enser's got a shotgun. I expect he'd use it."

"On us?"

"Sure. To 'protect his family.' But, Helen, don't let this bomb stuff get to you. It's a beautiful day. Why don't you go play with friends? Or else do your homework."

In the side yard, Mrs. Enser and my mother were hanging their wash on identical Sears clotheslines, talking over the forsythia. Mrs. Enser, who had fought hard against the fallout shelter taking up her garden space, now defended it with a convert's zeal. "Every family needs one," I heard her tell my mother. "Don't count on the government to save you. Even the Red Cross can't help everyone."

"But there're public bomb shelters right downtown," my mother reminded her. "In the schools, the post office, the library. Even the churches have them."

"Oh, be serious, Kathleen," Mrs. Enser chided. "You won't have time to get downtown. Or suppose you get Helen and the baby to a shelter and they say, 'Sorry, we're all full.' Then what? If you find someplace that takes you in, do you really think there'll be food and water there for everybody? Will they have formula and diapers for all the babies? Sanitary facilities, band-aids, linens, toys for the kids? You trust the *city* to think of these things? We're not talking about the London Blitz, sleep overnight in the Underground and everybody goes home in the morning. This is two straight weeks at least. We need to be self-reliant, like the pioneers."

She reeled off her own stock list: canned and dried foods, vitamins, clothes, soap, flashlights, generator, bottled water, cases of powdered milk and formula, complete first-aid kit, chemical toilet, board games, cards, books — everything you'd need to live underground until the all-clear sounded. "If we had connecting shelters," Mrs. Enser threw out, "we could even visit during World War III." She didn't mention the gun, but she must have known my mother knew about it. "And if we shop together, Kathleen," she offered, "we can buy in bulk."

This was a big attraction. My mother loved bargains. But she was also claustrophobic. The idea of two weeks underground was scaring her, even with board games and a chemical toilet.

"How about moving someplace safer?" my mother suggested.

"Like where? We're already in the suburbs."

"They say New Zealand won't have fallout," my mother said.

I inched closer. I'd read about New Zealand. "You know," I announced, "sinks drain counterclockwise in New Zealand, because it's the Southern Hemisphere."

Mrs. Enser's eyes widened. My mother shook her head at me. "It's not a jungle," she said quickly. "They've got supermarkets and everything."

But the sink idea had shaken Mrs. Enser. "Kathleen, could you really leave all this?" With a sweep of her hand, Mrs. Enser took in the maple trees along the street, our cars, bikes, and tricycles glittering in the sun, the bright green lawns, the pansies, picnic tables, and swing sets, everything clean and right.

"We'd come back. No war lasts forever," my mother said, weakening.

"Maybe not. But face facts, you've got to do *something.*"

My father didn't see it that way. He wouldn't buy sandbags for our basement and thought the New Zealand idea hilarious. Let my mother burn the carrots or break a plate, and he'd say, "You know, in New Zealand we'd be safe from these catastrophes." If she wanted to see a Broadway play, he'd point out that Auckland's a mere twenty thousand miles from New York City. When the baby threw up on the living-room couch, it was: "Don't tell me: there's no projectile vomiting in New Zealand!" This time my mother laughed.

"Stop laughing!" I shouted from my room. "It's not a joke!" If they loved me, why didn't they care about the future?

Jimmy Enser said I had to make them care. He said that when the Bomb falls, if you're outside, or even in a regular house, you die instantly or turn mutant, but in a shelter you just wait for the all-clear signal, and then come out, kill the mutants, and bury the dead. Everything will be peaceful afterwards, with no communists or bad people, just good Americans starting fresh. Jimmy showed me pictures of Hiroshima survivors with their eyeballs melted and strips of flesh hanging down. He had even worse pictures he wouldn't show me.

In Hiroshima there was no warning, so you couldn't really blame the Japs for not having shelters, Jimmy explained. But since we knew what the communists were planning, it was just dumb not to be prepared.

(end of excerpt)