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## Diary

### Evelyn Toynton

In the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, my New York City primary school, like every other school in the city, held weekly practice drills to prepare us for being bombed by the Russians. The drill, which immediately followed the pledge of allegiance to the flag, consisted of us all crouching under our desks for ten minutes, though it was understood that if an atomic bomb were dropped on Manhattan, we would need to hunker down for longer. We were instructed to hug our knees to our chests and lower our heads to avoid breathing in poisonous Russian dust.

Afterwards, we would brush ourselves off and stand while the teacher led us in song. Sometimes it was 'God Bless America', or 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee'; sometimes it was the anthem of the US navy, or the marines, or the air force. There was also a children's song called 'Lucky to Be an American': 'I like the way we all live without fear/I like to vote for my choice/Speak my mind, raise my voice/Yes, I like it here.' Being six years old, we couldn't appreciate the irony: even as we sang, the House Un-American Activities Committee was carrying out its interrogations of suspected communists. Quite a few people were living with fear.

This may have included the women who were leading us in the group singalongs. Our third-grade teacher offered up alternative versions of what was in our history textbooks, which described the Indians, as they were called then, as bloodthirsty savages who lived in wigwams and whooped as they attacked the brave settlers out West. The accompanying image showed a ketchup-coloured man, wearing only a few beads to cover his groin, holding up a scalp still covered in blond hair. 'Now, children,' Mrs Heyman said, 'I want you to close your books for a minute and listen to me.' The Indians, she told us, had been repeatedly forced off their tribal lands, their children had been taken from them and sent to government schools thousands of miles away. The book's portrayal of the heroic defenders of the Alamo was undermined, too, when she explained that all of Texas, along with California, Arizona and New Mexico, had been unlawfully stolen from the Mexicans. Even the Declaration of Independence was called into question: the same people who declared that all men had been created equal owned other human beings as slaves.

I don't think any of us regarded what she was saying as unpatriotic. I'm not certain we had a definite concept of patriotism, despite the songs and the pledge of allegiance and the lessons on how Russians had to stand in line for hours just to buy a pair of shoes. Or maybe it was that she never criticised the current government, or talked about the contemporary situation of African-Americans. It was all about events from long ago, sins committed in the distant past. (She may have worked out exactly how far she could go before getting into serious trouble.) We liked being treated as grown-ups, told grown-up truths; it made us feel solemn and important.

Once Mrs Heyman invited me to a Saturday gathering at her apartment, to recite some poems I had written. Like her, most of the guests in attendance were middle-aged Jewish women, several of whom also taught at P.S. 98. But in Mrs Heyman's living room, they were thrillingly different from their school personas. Not only did they wear sandals and necklaces made of shells, but, after applauding my recitation, they all lit cigarettes and started arguing with one another with a fierceness I'd never seen in adults before. It was the first time I'd heard the name Marx, except in the context of the Marx brothers, and I knew it wasn't Groucho they were talking about. They gesticulated, they leapt to their feet, one of them jabbed another in the chest to emphasise her point. I decided that these were the kind of friends I wanted when I grew up: people who got excited and shouted and smoked cigarettes and had shells dangling from their necks.

But shortly afterwards we moved to Connecticut, and though the McCarthy era was over, the teachers there didn't seem to harbour any subversive thoughts. I was the only pupil at Beaver Brook School who knew the shameful truth about the Founding Fathers and how America achieved its so-called manifest destiny. There were no weekly drills, we didn't have to scuttle under our desks any longer, but in junior high school the whole student body was called to the auditorium and shown a cartoon about how to protect ourselves from nuclear fallout if the Russians dropped a bomb on New York City, sixty miles away. We were instructed to put a white dinner plate on an outdoor window sill, and check every 15 minutes to see if any strange-looking dust had settled on it. If it had, all doors and windows were to be shut, and the whole family should sit on the floor in the middle of a room, or retreat to the basement if the house had one, and stay put until 'trained radiation experts' announced on the radio that the air was safe. Barricades of books and newspapers, or sandbags if available, were said to be useful to stop the radioactive dust from penetrating.

A few years later, after the Cuban Missile Crisis, my father summoned my older sister and me into his study to tell us that he and Marshall Young, our nearest neighbour, had installed a bomb shelter in the woods behind the Youngs' house. It seems only fair to mention that neither of them was a right-wing survivalist. Marshall had been the head of an NAACP chapter in Texas, and was shot at so often that he'd had to carry a pistol with him whenever he left the house. (He still had a bullet fragment in his leg.) My father, a refugee from Nazi Germany, was a progressive Democrat who, as part of a governor's advisory panel on drugs, would later advocate the legalisation of marijuana.

We were taken to inspect the shelter just once. Unlike the lavish, multi-roomed bunkers built today by billionaires, it was a bleak underground structure, a single room with grey concrete walls and a toilet behind a screen in the corner. Cots hung from chains in the ceiling; shelves along the walls were stocked with tins of Campbell's soup, MPF (multi-purpose powdered food) and bottled water. A hand-cranked generator was in place, and an air pump with six radiation filters. There was a meter to measure radiation levels, along with a rubber gas mask to be worn by whoever went outside to test if it was safe.

After she had shown us around, Marshall's wife, Dorothy, made us promise we wouldn't mention its existence to anyone. (Of course I told my two best friends.) There must have been some concern that other people would come banging on the roof, or try to get in through the Youngs' basement, where the entrance to the shelter was hidden behind a bookcase. Would Marshall have to use his mythical gun, which we'd never seen, to fend them off? My sister had been converted to socialism the previous

summer, at a drama camp where she'd performed in *Waiting for Lefty*, and was troubled by the notion that her life would be saved when so many other, perhaps worthier people would be left to perish. Unwilling to be outdone, I agreed that we should both forfeit our places when the time came. We spent hours at night anxiously discussing who should be offered the chance to survive the Russian attack instead of us. It had to be someone who lived nearby, since we couldn't count on anyone from, say, Africa – or even Pete Seeger, whose whereabouts we weren't sure of – getting there in time. We were left with a pretty sad slate of candidates, such as the head of the local cancer charity.

In the end, the bomb shelter was never used. Three years later, Dorothy died suddenly and Marshall moved to New York. I wonder if the people who bought the house knew that a tunnel in their basement led to an underground bunker, with ancient tins of soup and mould on the walls. Was it included in the estate agent's description when the house was put on the market? Maybe the new owners' children discovered it one day; maybe they invited their friends to take a look, or stored their secret stash of *Playboys* down there. I sometimes thought about going back to Country Ridge Road and asking, but I never did.

If the present occupants have children, they too will participate in drills at school, but to prepare them for mass shootings rather than bombs. Across America, schools and day-care centres hold 'active shooter drills', in which children as young as two are taught how to protect themselves if a gunman enters the premises and starts firing. Some of the drills involve real police, who storm in wearing black rubber masks and wielding assault rifles; some require student volunteers to play dead in the hallways, or to stagger around with fake blood smeared on their shirts and faces. In one video on YouTube, a group of kindergarten pupils hide behind the teacher's desk, huddled together with their heads on their knees. When they are all in place, the teacher closes the door to the classroom and pulls down the blinds, warning them to remain silent. In another, the pupils are ushered into a closet. There is one in which the children seek refuge, as we did, under their own desks. After a few minutes, they crawl out, get to their feet, and sing 'God Bless America'.