

1962: Planning for the End of the World

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Deborah had long understood the concept of the whited sepulchre, and knew she was one herself, well-behaved on the outside and properly clean for church, with King James tucked under her arm; but in her heart was a dark and stinking cavern, and in the cavern was a cold stone slab, and on the slab festered her unsaved soul, looking something like an Egyptian mummy, only short. When the communion plates came round, she was glad she was only ten and thus too young to partake—because any unbelievers who ate those crackers and drank that grape juice unworthily would, she knew, be eating and drinking damnation unto themselves, and she was in quite enough trouble already.

Apparently Cuba, where cigars came from, was doing something to fulfill biblical prophecy, and so the world was about to end; and no matter which came first, the Rapture or the nuclear blasts, she would be there to see it. If her parents were correct about God, they would most likely be whisked away to heaven well before the bombs dropped, along with Matthew and Rhoda and even Ruthie, who had recently been saved at the age of five. The baby, however, was a moot point. Deborah had been unable to get a straight answer

about whether, for example, dead heathen babies went straight to heaven; but she presumed they did not, otherwise why had that missionary lady wept over the fate of their little unredeemed souls? Perhaps Danny, as a Christian baby, would be taken in the Rapture on the strength of their parents' faith, but that would hardly seem fair to the heathen babies, nor to Deborah herself. In any case, it seemed wise to have a contingency plan that could take Danny into account.

Homeward bound from church, it was Ruthie's turn to sit in front between Mum and Dad. Deborah climbed into the back with her customary dread. At least in the front seat, she could grab the wheel if her father suddenly vanished in the Rapture. The Bible said it would happen in the twinkling of an eye, and she was not sure there'd be enough time for her to launch herself over the seatback, master the steering and locate what she hoped was the brake pedal before the car smashed into something. Better altogether, she thought, if the Lord would delay the Rapture at least until Dad had parked the Chrysler in the drive. Grimly, wishing she could pray, she concentrated on watching the back of her father's head for the first glimmer of invisibility.

Home at last, another perilous journey safely done, Deborah trudged upstairs to the room she shared with Rhoda, to put off her Sunday best.

*Atheists* were on her mind, having appeared in the pastor's morning prayers alongside the godless communists from whom the Lord should be saving His people, and President Kennedy, who was (for present purposes only) the Lord's instrument. She was not, she hoped, a godless communist, but she figured she must be an atheist. Uncle Art in Kelowna was obviously one, because he smoked and drank and did not go to church. *Worldly* applied to people who went to church, but to one of the many wrong ones, who paid lip service to God without being properly born again. *Heathen* referred to those who worshipped the wrong god altogether: idolaters, pagans, natives in the jungle, Catholics. But worst of all were the atheists who, like Deborah, had been shown the light and had rebelliously turned their faces away. The funny thing was, she did not feel rebellious—in fact, she rather wanted to believe. It was Jesus who seemed unaccountably reluctant to come to her.

The smell of the Sunday roast rolled richly from the kitchen. Deborah did her table-setting duty and then lay on the living room rug to read the *Herald* from the night before, upper body propped on elbows flanking the diagram of how the world would end. The missiles' probable routes were bold grey arrows streaking southward through Alberta's familiar outline, straight across the black dot marked Calgary. She understood the caption—*Bowling Alley of*

*North America*—to mean that any atomic bomb failing to get as far as the US border would land downtown, probably on or near the Hudson's Bay Company. South of the map, President Kennedy stood firm and grave behind a bristling podium.

Mum cooked roasts, Dad carved them. This was the natural order of the world, not to be altered even by the imminence of World War Three. But during grace, a faroff siren sounded outside. Matthew, whose turn it was to pray, paused. "Ambulance," Dad whispered kindly, and Matthew swallowed hard and finished the grace. Deborah joined in the amen chorus. Her mother, she saw when she opened her eyes, was looking upset, resting one pale cheek on the dark top of Danny's head. Did that mean she, too, was worried about what would happen to Danny in the Rapture? Deborah, deep in thought, made a volcanic lake with her mashed potatoes and gravy. Of course nobody was worried about Deborah, because nobody knew she was an atheist. She kept her status quiet partly out of shame, like that of the last player chosen up for softball, and partly out of an instinctive distaste for the messy process of being prayed over. She wished there was some good way of letting her mother know that she, Deborah, would be there to look after Danny if the Rapture happened and God's policy on babies turned out to be on the tough side.

And then what? Assuming there was a God, and He plucked the Christians out of harm's way, only the unconverted (like herself) would be left behind. Food would not be one of her problems, at least not to begin with. Mum and Dad had stocked up early in the crisis, enough tinned food to keep Deborah herself going for months, bags and bags of milk powder she could feed to Danny. But alas, it would not be safe to stay in the house alone. And it was not only the bombs that worried her, it was the hardly imaginable horrors of the Tribulation, when the world would be Satan's playground and the grownups would behave like the worst kind of juvenile delinquents. There would be nobody left in Calgary she could trust, because all the local aunts and uncles would have been Raptured away as well; and anyway, Calgary was the *Bowling Alley of North America*. Her only course would be to pack up some food and walk all the way to Kelowna to find Uncle Art, not so bad on her own, but difficult if she had to carry Danny and all his diapers and baby food and so forth. On the whole, she thought, it would make things easier if she were right about God not existing. At least if the bombs rained down upon the just and unjust alike, the whole family would die together and she would not be left alone. That night, she dreamed of a great iron door, a hundred feet high and a hundred wide, lumbering shut between her and her mother.

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The world did not end on Monday, which was notable only for the installation of an air-raid siren on a new pole across the street from the school. On Tuesday, Matthew and Rhoda brought a pile of civil defense pamphlets home from the junior high. On Wednesday, Mum would not let Deborah go downtown for the Brownies Hallowe'en party — "just in case", she said, and stopped right there. On Thursday, an ominous miracle appeared on the kitchen counter: a radio that did not need plugging in. It had been bought, Matthew informed his sisters, so they could hear the civil defense bulletins if electricity was cut after the war began. This was novel and interesting, but it raised other questions for Deborah. Right or wrong, her parents must have faith they'd be snatched from the world before the bombs fell. So why were they preparing for the aftermath?

Friday morning recess: peaceful except for playground noises, with not much traffic on the road separating the school from the cemetery slope. Then the siren voice began to wail from across the street and the playground took on the appearance of a game of statues. Sandy Wilson, the only kid in school with an air-raid shelter in her basement, recovered first and set off for home at a smug trot. Deborah watched her go without envy. She had examined the

pamphlets showing blast patterns and firestorm zones, concentric circles of destruction, all the roots of a mushroom cloud, and she knew there was no point in taking shelter when your house was in walking distance of ground zero. She felt no fear, only an odd relief: she was right after all, there was no Rapture, no God, no everlasting fires of Hell. Calmly she lifted her eyes to the north, squinting to glimpse the first grey arrows of the missiles homing in on downtown Seventh Avenue.

But a moment later her old uncertainties came crashing back, with a dire addition. It occurred to her that bombs falling now would not, in themselves, prove anything, because she had no way of telling whether the Rapture had taken place since she left for school. How *could* she know? Miss Douglas's eye makeup and tight sweaters suggested she was not going to be Raptured, and Deborah knew for certain none of her classmates were candidates. The true, Rapture-worthy church was, in fact, rather small and very exclusive. Deborah could carry on for hours after the event and never realize it until she arrived home to an empty, echoing house. What if God's elect were already safely in the City Foursquare, while she was about to be turned into radioactive ash and her soul sent straight to Hell?

She pushed aside the thought that her situation was at least partly God's fault for being so *darned* unbelievable. In the interest of fairness, she gave Him one last try: she closed her eyes and again issued the invitation that Jesus was reputed never to ignore. Silence. She may as well have been talking into Ruthie's pink plastic phone, or switching on a television that wasn't plugged in. She gave up and opened her eyes.

Nothing was moving yet in the northern sky. There was still time to get home and learn which awful fate was the one actually hanging over her. She ran across the playground, shinnied under the chainlink fence, and found herself pounding down the alleyway with three or four others. When Miss Douglas began shouting something from the school steps, Deborah only closed her ears and ran faster, though she saw Larry Whitehead stop and turn back. She took the first two blocks at a flat run, then made the enforced halt before crossing the busy road at the bottom of the hill. Even at the end of the world, one had to stop, look, and listen. Her street was deserted, a bad sign. She tore past the Frasers' house and the Carneys', the Porters' and the Morrisons', and into the driveway. But as she paused to catch her breath, she heard laughter in the back yard. Startled, she slid into the shelter of the lilac bush and peered out through its tangle of thick bare poles.

There was Mum, very much present and un-Raptured, raking leaves with Ruthie and looking not at all as if she expected a nuclear holocaust in the next few minutes. Danny was an unseen presence signified by the shawl-draped baby carriage. Deborah, feeling no desire to announce herself, watched from behind the lilac thicket while sending up little directionless prayers of thanksgiving. At some point she became aware the siren had ceased, and still the bombs had not dropped; and so it seemed to her that neither principalities, nor powers, nor the Lord God, nor even air-raid sirens, were entirely to be trusted on the issue of bad news.

God, however, was still an open question. Reserving judgment for yet another day and hoping He would do the same, Deborah extricated herself from the lilacs and set off back to school.