



FALLOUT

TODD STRASSER

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For My Father

It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization.

**—JOHN F. KENNEDY
on the Cuban Missile Crisis,
October 27, 1962**

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.

SIX

“Keep an eye out,” Ronnie told Freak O’ Nature, and continued up the Lewandowskis’ driveway. Feeling light-headed with misgivings, I followed, wondering if Ronnie felt that way, too. He had to know that stealing was wrong. Was a Sara Lee frozen cheesecake really worth this much anxiety?

At the garage door, I glanced back at Freak O’ Nature, hoping he would signal that someone was coming and we should abandon this unlawful endeavor. But he wasn’t even looking at us. Instead he was staring down at his radio as if watching the words come out.

Ronnie took hold of the garage-door handle. The door creaked upward, revealing a shadowy interior that smelled of car oil and dry grass and was crammed with bicycles, toy carriages, and Hula-Hoops. Without a word, he marched toward the back. The freezer was one of those horizontal models, and a small cloud of chilled white vapor rose into our faces when Ronnie lifted the top. The inner walls were caked white with ice, and it was filled with rectangular packages of chicken pot pies, frozen vegetables, Swanson TV dinners, and the treasure that we sought, Sara Lee frozen cheesecakes. Ronnie picked up a box, covered with a thin film of ice crystals.

And that’s when the Lewandowskis’ station wagon pulled in.

7

“Turn on a light!” Sparky sobs. Paula’s still crying, too. It’s impossibly dark.

“Give me a moment,” Dad says wearily, his words interrupted by deep breaths.

Above us, there’s only silence, as if the world has stopped.

Or disappeared.

“*Please*, Dad?” Sparky implores.

“Yes, Edward,” Dad answers in his soft voice. There’s a faint rustle in the blackness as he feels around for a light.

“Mom?” I say.

She doesn’t answer. I wonder if Janet’s still holding her. I’d give anything to hear her reassuring voice.

Paula continues to sob in the dark. It’s just her and her dad. Not her mom or brother. My stomach twists. I hate to think of what’s happened to them. Our mom may be hurt, but at least she’s here.

There’s a soft slithering sound like Dad sliding his hands along the wall. “Everybody be still,” he says. “There’s a flashlight around here somewhere.”

Clinks and scratching follow, as if he’s touching things.

Crash!

People cry out in surprise. For one terrifying instant, I imagine that the roof of the shelter is caving in, then realize it was just a bunch of things falling from a shelf. Dad curses, then says, “Sorry, everyone.”

“You all right?” Mr. Shaw asks.

“Yes.”

“Dad, *please* turn on a light,” Sparky begs.

“I’m trying, Edward. Believe me, I’m trying.” There’s frustration in his voice. Things jangle and scrape as he sorts through whatever fell.

“What about the light from before?” Sparky asks.

I don’t want Dad to get angry, which he sometimes does when we ask too many questions. So I tell Sparky, “It won’t work. There’s no electricity anymore.”

“Why not?”

There’s a clunk and Dad grunts, “Damn it!” as if he banged his head.

“Are you okay?” This time it’s Mrs. Shaw who asks.

“Yes.” But he sounds even more frustrated. Sometimes when he got this way in the house, I would hide in a closet.

“Why isn’t there electricity?” Sparky asks.

“Because the bomb blew everything up,” I tell him.

“I didn’t hear a bomb,” my brother says.

“Be quiet,” Dad snaps. “I’m trying to think.”

“But I didn’t hear a bomb,” Sparky whines, his voice breaking. “Just turn on the light.”

“Quiet!” Dad bellows.

Sparky starts crying again. Fearing Dad will get angrier and yell even more, I pull my brother tighter to me and shush him the way Mom would. More clinking and scratching follows. Then, finally, a click and a light goes on.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, then I see Dad near the bunks, shining the beam from a long silver flashlight on Mom, whose head is on Janet’s lap. My breath catches; there’s a big red stain on Janet’s robe. Mom’s hair is dark and gummy, and in the dim light her skin looks almost gray.

“Mom!” Sparky wails rawly. He bursts out of my grasp and flies toward her, but Dad catches him.

“She’s going to be okay,” he says, swinging the flashlight beam away. I bite my tongue not to say what I’m thinking, which is that she doesn’t look like she’s going to be okay. Dad has to wrestle Sparky, who’s still struggling to get to Mom. “We have to leave her alone, Edward,” he says softly. “We have to let her get better.” He holds my little brother gently but firmly.

“Listen to your father,” Janet tells him.

“But what’s wrong with her?” Sparky asks anxiously, craning to see around Dad.

“Mr. Porter, is there a first-aid kit?” Janet asks.

Dad aims the flashlight at some shelves. “Get it, Scott.”

I rise, and that’s when I notice Mr. McGovern and Paula near the shield wall. Paula’s curled in his arms and weeping miserably. Mr. McGovern hugs her, his eyes glistening.

They’re half a family.

It’s . . . horrible.

eight

“Run!” Ronnie yelled.

We sprinted around the Lewandowskis’ station wagon — past the astonished faces of Mrs. Lewandowski, Linda, and the rest of the brood — and out into the sunlight, where there was no sign of Freak O’ Nature. I didn’t understand why we were running. Mrs. Lewandowski had seen us. Lest there be any doubt, she now stood at the mouth of the garage and called, “Ronnie? Scott? What’s going on?”

Being a dutiful child who’d been taught to answer grown-ups, I began to slow, but Ronnie grunted, “Don’t stop!”

So I sped up again.

With the cheesecake box tucked into the crook of his arm like a football, Ronnie led the way. On the sidewalk ahead of us was Freak O’ Nature, who’d abandoned his lookout post and was walking home with the transistor radio pressed to his ear. For a moment, I wondered if Ronnie was running after him, angry that Freak O’ Nature had gone AWOL. But he ran right past him and kept going.

As I sprinted past Freak O’ Nature, he asked, “Where’re you going?”

“We got caught!” I gasped.

Ronnie ran another hundred yards and then slowed to a jog. I would have gained on him, but I was winded and slowing as well. Soon we were walking about fifteen yards apart. A stitch had started to cramp in my right side.

“Wait.” I gulped in pain. “She saw us. She called our names.”

But Ronnie kept going — down the sidewalk . . . across Freak O’ Nature’s front yard . . . around the side of his house . . . and into the backyard, where he plopped down under a maple tree. I flopped down opposite him, massaging the stitch in my side.

Neither of us spoke. Ronnie sat staring at the Sara Lee cheesecake box in his lap.

A minute later, Freak O’ Nature joined us, dropping into an Indian-style position.

“Thanks a lot,” Ronnie growled.

“For what?” asked Freak O’ Nature.

“I told you to keep an eye out.”

“I did.”

“For the *Lewandowskis*.”

“Oh.” Freak O’ Nature mulled this over. “Sorry.”

“She’s probably telling our mothers right now.” I imagined Mrs. Lewandowski on the party line, reporting the incident to both our moms at once. “We’re dead.”

“You could give it back,” suggested Freak O’ Nature.

“No!” Ronnie clutched the box as if it would shoot right back to the freezer if he let go.

“It’s just a stupid cheesecake,” I said.

To end the debate, Ronnie tore open the box and peeled back the round tinfoil lid, revealing the light-brown-rimmed yellow cake inside. I wished I felt hungry, but

mostly I felt dread. Getting caught stealing surely qualified as a spankable offense.

Prying the cake out, Ronnie gripped the sides and tried to break off a piece, but in its frozen state, it wouldn't even bend. He bared his teeth in the effort, then finally smashed the cake against his knee. It broke sort of in half, and he handed the smaller piece to me and kept the larger for himself.

"What about me?" Freak O' Nature asked.

"You abandoned your post," Ronnie said.

Freak O' Nature didn't reply. He rarely argued with anyone.

The chunk Ronnie had given me bore the indentations of his fingers and was covered with his fingerprints. Ronnie bit into the corner of his piece where the filling met the graham-cracker crust. He held the bite in his mouth for a moment, probably letting the cheesecake soften, and then closed his eyes, a blissful smile appearing on his lips as if to rub in Freak O' Nature's loss.

Somehow, despite all the regret I felt about my participation in this terrible crime, and the apprehension about being punished, my appetite crept back. I found a corner of cake free of Ronnie's fingerprints and took a nibble. The cheesecake was cold and creamy and delicious, and I bit off a little of the nutty brown crust to go along with it. Like a prisoner on death row, I began to savor my last meal.

9

The medical kit is the size of a lunch box, with a red cross on it. Next to it is a green box I've seen once before, in Dad's closet. I know what's in that box, and finding it here catches me by surprise and makes me uncomfortable. I look away and take the first-aid kit to Dad.

He hands me the flashlight. "Keep it aimed on her."

I shine the beam at Mom's face, which is gray with some black-and-blue marks near her ears. As Dad rips open a gauze pad, then gently lifts Mom's head and presses the pad against the wound, my stomach coils with anxiety. Her hair in back is all dark reddish and stuck together. As if Dad knows what I'm thinking, he says, "It looks bad, but head wounds bleed a lot."

"Uh-huh." I agree, mostly because I don't want him to get mad.

"We'll just have to wait until she wakes up," he says, holding the gauze pad in place and pulling a long strip of white tape, which he starts to wrap around her head.

"Mr. Porter?" Janet says.

"Yes?" Dad looks up.

"That's not the way."

Their eyes meet for a moment, and then Dad nods and lets her take over.

Janet takes a small pair of scissors from the first-aid kit and begins to cut the hair away from Mom's wound.

No one speaks. The *snip, snip, snip* of the scissors is the only sound in this little cement box of a room. Maybe there's too much to think about. Paula and her dad must be thinking about Mrs. McGovern and Teddy. Is Ronnie thinking about his collie, Leader? What about the rest of our friends and neighbors, teachers, cousins, and grandparents? Did some of them find shelter in basements and tunnels and the other places with those black-and-yellow Civil Defense Fallout Shelter signs?

Maybe some, but not *everybody*. Not the ones who were on the other side of the trapdoor.

Huddled in the shadows with her husband and Ronnie, Mrs. Shaw quietly begins to sob.

Snip, snip, snip . . . Dark clumps of hair fall to the concrete floor. Janet turns to Dad. "Could I have some water, Mr. Porter?"

With a start, Dad snatches the flashlight from me and shines it up at a large red sausage-shaped metal tank hanging above us. Skinny brown pipes run into it from the ceiling. Rising quickly, he reaches up and turns some valves, then waits as if he's expecting something. Everyone else looks up, too. Paula's cheeks glisten with tears.

"Come on," Dad mutters at the tank, and I feel myself tense.

Seconds pass. He stares intently. "Come on!"

I'm not sure what's supposed to happen, but it's obvious from the way Dad's acting