

H. C. Neal

Who Shall Dwell

5 It came on a Sunday afternoon and that was good, because if it had happened on a weekday the father would have been at work and the children at school, leaving the mother at home alone and the whole family disorganized with hardly any hope at all. They had prayed that it would never come ever, but suddenly here it was.

10 The father a slender, young-old man, slightly stooped from years of labor, was resting on the divan and half-listening to a program of waltz music on the radio. Mother was in the kitchen preparing a chicken for dinner and the younger boy and girl were in the bedroom drawing crude pictures of familiar barnyard animals on a shared slate. The older boy was in the tack shed out back, saddle-soaping some harness. When the waltz program was interrupted by an announcer with a routine political appeal, the father rose, 15 tapped the ash from his pipe and ambled lazily into the kitchen.

“How about joining me in a little glass of wine” he asked, patting his wife affectionately on the hip. “If you don’t think it would be too crowded,” she replied, smiling easily at their standing jest. He grinned amiably and reached into the cupboard for the bottle and glasses.

20 Suddenly the radio message was abruptly cut off. A moment of humming silence. Then, in a voice pregnant with barely controlled excitement, the announcer almost shouted: “Bomb alert! Bomb alert! Attention! Attention! A salvo of missiles has just been launched across the sea, heading this way. Attention! They are expected to strike within the next 16 minutes. Sixteen minutes! This is a verified alert! Take cover! Take 25 covert! Keep you radios tuned for further instructions.”

“My God!” the father gasped, dropping the glasses. “Oh, my God” His ruggedly handsome face was ashen, puzzled, as though he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that this was real – but still could not quite believe it.

30 “Get the children,” his wife blurted, then dashed to the door to call the older boy. He stared at her a brief moment, seeing the fear in her pretty face, but something else, too, something divorced from the fear. Defiance. And a loathing for all men involved in the making and dispatch of nuclear weapons. He wheeled then, and ran to the bedroom. “Let’s go,” he snapped, “shelter drill!”. Despite a belated 35 attempt to tone down the second phrase and make it seem like just another of the many rehearsals they’d had, his voice and bearing galvanized the youngsters into instant action. They leaped from the bed without a word and dashed for the door.

He hustled them through the kitchen to the rear door and sent them scooting to the shelter. AS he returned to the bedroom for outer garments for himself and his wife, the older boy came running in. “This 40 is the hot one, Son” said his father tersely, “the real one.” He and the boy stared at each other for a long moment, both knowing what must be done and each knowing the other would more than do his share, yet, wonder still at the frightening fact that it must be done at all.

“How much time we got, Dad?”

45 “Not long,” the father replied, glancing at his watch, “12, maybe 14 minutes.”

The boy disappeared into the front room, going after the flashlight and battery radio. The father stepped to the closet, slid the door open and picked up the flat metal bar containing the vital papers, marriage, license,

50 birth certificates, etc. He tossed the box on the bed, then took down his wife's shortcoat and his own hunting jacket. Draping the clothing over his arm, he then picked up the metal box and the big family Bible from the headboard on the bed. Everything else they would need had been stored in the shelter the past several months. He heard his wife approaching and turned as she entered the room.

"Ready, Dear?" she asked.

55 "Yes, we're ready now," he replied, "are the kids gone in?"

"They're all down," she answered, then added a faint touch of despairing bewilderment, "I still can't believe it's real."

"We've got to believe it" he said, looking her steadily in the eye, "we can't afford not to."

60 Outside, the day was crisp and clear, typical of early fall. Just right for boating on the river, fishing or bird shooting. A regular peach of a day, he thought for fleeing underground to escape the awesome hell of a nuclear strike. Who was the writer who had said about atomic weapons, "Would any self-respecting cannibal toss one into a village of women and children?" He looked at his watch again. Four minutes had elapsed since the first alarm. Twelve minutes, more or less, remained. Inside the shelter, he dogged the door with its double-strength strap iron bar, and looked around to see that his family was squared away. 65 His wife, wearing her attractive blue print cotton frock (he noticed for the first time), was methodically checking the food supplies, assisted by the older son. The small children had already put their initial fright behind them, as is the nature of youngster, and were drawing on the slate again in quiet, busy glee. Now it began. The waiting.

70 They knew, he and his wife, that others would come soon, begging and crying to be taken in now that the time was here, now that Armageddon had come screaming toward them, stabbing through the sky on stubbed wings of shining steel.

75 They had argued the aspects of this when the shelter was abuilding. It was in her mind to share their refuge. "We can't call ourselves Christians and then deny safety to our friends when the showdown comes," she concluded, "that isn't what God teaches."

80 "That's nothing but religious pap," he retorted with a degree of anger, "oatmeal Christianity." For he was a hardheaded man, an Old Testament man. "God created the family as the basic unit of society," he reasoned. "That should make it plain that man's primary Christian duty is to protect his family." "But don't you see?" she protested, "we must prepare to purify ourselves... to rise above this 'mine' thinking and be God's own son, who said 'Love thy neighbor.'"

85 "No," he replied with finality, "I can't buy that." Then, after a moment's thought while he groped for the words to make her understand the truth which burned in the core of his soul, "It is my family I must save, no one more. You. These kids. Our friends are like the people of Noah's time: he warned them of the coming flood when he built the ark on God's command. He was ridiculed and scoffed at, just as we have been ridiculed. No," and here his voice took on a new sad sureness, an air of dismal certainty, "it is meant 90 that if they don't prepare, they die. I see no need for further argument." And so, she had reluctantly acquiesced.

With seven minutes left, the first knock rang the shelter door. "Let us in! For God's sake, man, let us in!" He recognized the voice. It was his first neighbor down the road toward town.

95 "No!" shouted the father, "there is only room for us. Go! Take shelter in your homes. You may yet be spared!"

Again came the pounding. Louder. More urgent.

100 “You let us in or we’ll break down this door!” He wondered with some concern, if they were actually getting a ram of some sort to batter at the door. He was reasonably certain it would hold. At least as long as it must.

The seconds relentlessly ticked away. Four minutes left.

105 His wife stared at the door in stricken fascination and moaned slightly.
“Steady, girl” he said, evenly. The children, having halted their game at the first shouting, looked at him in fearful wonderment. He glared at his watch, ran his hands distraughtly through his hair, and said nothing. Three minutes left.

110 At that moment, a woman’s cry from the outside pierced him in an utterly vulnerable spot, a place the men could never have touched with their desperate demands. “If you won’t let me in,” she cried, “please take my baby, my little girl.”

He was stunned by her plea. This he had not anticipated. What must I do? He asked himself in sheer agony. What man on earth could deny a child the chance to live?

115 At that point, his wife rose, sobbing, and stepped to the door. Before he could move to stop her, she let down the latch and dashed outside. Instantly a three-year old girl was thrust into the shelter. He hastily fought the door latch on again, then stared at the frightened little newcomer in mute rage, hating her with an abstract hatred for simply being there in his wife’s place and knowing he could not turn her out. He sat down heavily, trying desperately to think. The voices outside grew louder. He glanced at his watch, looked
120 at the faces of his own children a long moment, then rose to his feet. There were two minutes left, and he had made his decision. He marveled now that he had even considered any other choice.

“Son,” he said to the older boy, “you take care of them.” It was as simple as that.

125 Unlatching the door, he thrust it open and stepped out. The crowd surged toward him. Blocking the door with his body, he snatched up the two children nearest him, a boy and a girl, and shoved them into the shelter. “Bar that door,” he shouted to his son, and don’t open it for at least a week!”

Hearing the latch drop into place, he turned and glanced around at the faces in the crowd. Some of them were still babbling incoherently, utterly panic-stricken. Others were quiet now, resigned, no longer afraid. Stepping to his wife’s side, he took her hand and spoke in a warm, low tone. “They will be all right, the boy will lead them.” He grinned reassuringly and added, “We should be together, you and I.”

130 She smiled wordlessly through her tears and squeezed his hand, exchanging with him in the one brief gesture a lifetime and more of devotion.

135 Then struck the first bomb, blinding them, burning them, blasting them into eternity. Streaking across the top of the world, across the extreme northern tip of Greenland, then flaming downrange through the chilled Arctic skies, it had passed Moscow, over Voronezh, and on over Krasny to detonate high above their city of Shakhty.

140 The bird had been 19 minutes in flight, launched from a bomb-blasted, seared-surface missile pit on the coast of California. America’s retaliation continued for several hours.

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