

CHAPTER

18

LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Nuclear Age*
by Tim O'Brien

Section 4

The main character of this novel, 49-year-old William Cowling, grew up under the dark cloud of anxiety that loomed during the height of the Cold War. In this excerpt, Cowling recalls how he reacted to the threat of nuclear attack when he was a teenager in the 1950s. As you read, think about the steps Cowling takes to protect himself. Do you think his plan could help him survive a nuclear war?

When I was a kid, I converted my Ping-Pong table into a fallout shelter. Funny? Poignant? A nifty comment on the modern age? Well, let me tell you something. The year was 1958, and I was scared. Who knows how it started? Maybe it was all that CONELRAD stuff on the radio, tests of the Emergency Broadcast System, pictures of H-bombs in *Life* magazine, strontium 90 in the milk, the times in school when we'd crawl under our desks and cover our heads in practice for the real thing. Or maybe it was rooted deep inside me. In my own inherited fears, in the genes, in a coded conviction that the world wasn't safe for human life.

Really, who knows?

Whatever the sources, I was a frightened child. At night I'd toss around in bed for hours, battling the snagged sheets, and then when sleep finally came, sometimes close to dawn, my dreams would be clotted with sirens and melting ice caps and radioactive gleamings and ICBMs whining in the dark.

I was a witness. I saw it happen. In dreams, in imagination, I watched the world end. . . .

Even as a kid, maybe because I was a kid, I understood that there was nothing make-believe about doomsday. No hocus-pocus. No mid-night fantasy. I knew better. It was real, like physics, like the laws of combustion and gravity. I could truly see it: a sleek nose cone, the wiring and dials and tangled circuitry. Real firepower, real danger. I was normal, yes, stable and levelheaded, but I was also willing to face the truth.

Anyway, I didn't have much choice. The nightmares had been squeezing my sleep for months, and finally, on a night in early May, a very quiet night, I woke up dizzy. My eyeballs ached. Things were so utterly silent I feared I'd gone deaf. Absolute silence. I sat up and wiped my face and waited for the world to rebalance itself. I'd been dreaming of

war—whole continents on fire, oceans boiling, cities in ash—and now, with that dreadful silence, it seemed that the universe had died in its sleep.

I was a child. There were few options.

I scrambled out of bed, put on my slippers, and ran for the basement. No real decision, I just did it. Basement, I thought.

I went straight for the Ping-Pong table.

Shivering, wide awake, I began piling scraps of lumber and bricks and old rugs onto the table, making a thick roof, shingling it with a layer of charcoal briquettes to soak up the deadly radiation. I fashioned walls out of cardboard boxes filled with newspapers and two-by-fours and whatever basement junk I could find. I built a ventilation shaft out of cardboard tubing. I stocked the shelter with rations from the kitchen pantry, laid in a supply of bottled water, set up a dispensary of Band-Aids and iodine, designed my own little fallout mask.

I was a child. There were few options.

When all this was finished, near dawn, I crawled under the

table and lay there faceup, safe, arms folded across my chest.

And, yes, I slept. No dreams.

My father found me down there. Still half asleep, I heard him calling out my name in a voice so distant, so muffled and hollow, that it might've come from another planet.

I didn't answer.

A door opened, lights clicked on. I watched my father's slippers glide across the concrete floor.

"William?" he said.

I sank deeper into my shelter.

"Hey, cowboy," my father said. "Out."

His voice had a stern, echoing sound. It made me coil up.

"Out," he repeated.

I could see the blue veins in his ankles. "Okay, in a minute," I told him. "I'm sort of busy right now."

My father stood still for a moment, then shuffled to the far end of the table. His slippers made a whish-whish noise. "Listen here," he said, "it's a swell little fort, a dandy, but you can't—"

"It's not a fort," I said.

"No?"

And so I explained it to him. How, in times like these, we needed certain safeguards. A line of defense against the man-made elements. A fallout shelter.

My father sneezed.

He cleared his throat and muttered something. Then, suddenly, in one deft motion, he bent down and grabbed me by the ankles and yanked me out from under the table.

Oddly, he was smiling.

"William," he murmured. "What's this?"

"What?"

"This. Right here."

Learning forward, still smiling, he jabbed a finger at my nose. At first I didn't understand.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "It's a fallout mask."

Actually, of course, it was just a paper bag filled with sawdust and charcoal briquettes. The bag had ventilation holes in it, and the whole contraption was attached to my face by strings and elastic bands. I grinned and started to show him how it worked, but my father raised his arm in a quick jerky movement, like a traffic cop, as if to warn me about something, then he squeezed my shoulder.

"Upstairs," he said. "On the double. Right now."

He seemed upset.

He pulled the mask off and marched me up the stairs, coming on strong with all that fatherly stuff about how I could've caught pneumonia, how he had enough to worry about without finding his kid asleep under a Ping-Pong table. All the while he kept glancing at me with those sharp blue eyes, half apprehensive and half amused, measuring.

When we got up to the kitchen, he showed my mother the mask. "Go ahead," he said, "guess what it is." But he didn't give her a chance. "A fallout mask. See there? Regulation fallout mask."

My mother smiled.

"Lovely," she said.

Then my father told her about the Ping-Pong table. He didn't openly mock me; he was subtle

about it—a certain change of tone, raising his eyebrows when he thought I wasn't looking. But I was looking. And it made me wince. "The Ping-Pong table," he said slowly, "it's now a fallout shelter. Get it? A fallout shelter." He stretched the words out like rubber bands, letting them snap back hard: "Fallout shelter. Ping-Pong."

"It's sweet," my mother said, and her eyes did a funny rolling trick, then she laughed.

"Fallout," my father kept saying.

Again, they didn't mean to be cruel. But even after they'd scooted me in for a hot bath, I could hear them hooting it up, making jokes, finally tiptoeing down to the basement for a peek at my handiwork. I didn't see the humor in it.

Over breakfast, I tried to explain that radiation could actually kill you. Pure poison, I told them.

Or it could turn you into a mutant or a dwarf or something. "I mean, cripes," I said, "don't you guys even think about it, don't you worry?" I was confused. I couldn't understand those sly smiles. Didn't they read the newspapers? Hadn't they seen pictures of people who'd been exposed to radioactivity—

hair burned off, bleeding tongues, teeth falling out, skin curled up like charred paper? Where was the joke in all that?

Somehow, though, I started feeling defensive, almost guilty, so finally I shut up and finished my pancakes and hustled off to school. God, I thought, am I crazy?

But that didn't end it.

All day long I kept thinking about the shelter, figuring ways to improve on it, drawing diagrams, calculating, imagining how I'd transform that plywood table into a real bastion against total war. In art class, I drew up elaborate renovation blueprints; in study hall, I devised a makeshift system for the decontamination of water supplies; during noon recess, while the rest of the kids screwed around, I began compiling a detailed list of items essential to human survival.

No question, it was nuke fever. But I wasn't wacko. In fact, I felt fully sane—tingling, in control.

In a way, I suppose, I was pushed on by the memory of that snug, dreamless sleep in my shelter. Cozy and walled in and secure. Like the feeling you

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get in a tree house, or in a snow fort, or huddled around a fire at night. I'll even admit that my motives may have been anchored in some ancestral craving for refuge, the lion's instinct for the den, the impulse that first drove our species into caves. Safety, it's normal. The mole in his hole. The turtle in his shell. Look at history: the Alamo, castles on the Rhine, moated villages, turrets, frontier stockades, storm cellars, foxholes, barbed wire, an attic in Amsterdam, a cave along the Dead Sea. Besides, you can't ignore the realities. You can't use psychology to explain away the bomb.

I didn't need a shrink. I needed sanctuary.

And that's when the Pencil Theory hit me. I was sitting at my desk during the final hour of classes that day, daydreaming, doodling, and then bang, the answer was there like a gift from God. For a second I sat there frozen. I held the solution in my hand—a plain yellow pencil.

"Pencils," I said.

I must've said it in a loud voice, too loud, because the teacher suddenly jerked her head and gave me a long stare. I just smiled.

The rest was simple.

When the final bell rang, I trotted down to the school supply room, opened up my book bag, stuffed it full of No. 2 soft-lead pencils, zipped the bag shut, and hightailed it for home. Nothing to it. I didn't like the idea of thievery, but this wasn't a time for splitting moral hairs. It was a matter of live or die.

That evening, while my mom and dad were watching *I've Got a Secret*, I slipped down into the basement and quietly went to work reinforcing my shelter.

The theory was simple: Pencils contain lead; lead acts as an effective barrier against radiation.

No question, it was nuke fever. But I wasn't wacko. In fact, I felt fully sane—tingling, in control.

It made perfect sense. Logical, scientific, practical.

Quickly, I stripped the table of everything I'd piled on it the night before, and then, very carefully, I began spreading out the pencils in neat rows, taking pains not to leave any cracks or spaces. Wizard, I thought. I replaced the lumber and bricks and rugs, added a double layer of charcoal briquettes, and then crowned it off with an old mattress. All told, my shelter's new roof was maybe three feet

thick. More important, though, it now included that final defensive shield of solid lead.

Research Options

1. William builds a fallout shelter so that he'll be safe in the event of nuclear war. What are the pros and cons of his design? First, research the effects of nuclear war in the 1950s. Then determine whether William's fallout shelter would protect him from those effects. Share your conclusions with classmates.
2. As you learned in Chapter 18, some Americans did build backyard fallout shelters during the Cold War. Find different pictures—photographs, diagrams, advertisements—that illustrate what these fallout shelters looked like. To locate pictures, you might use resources such as history books about the Cold War in the 1950s and early 1960s, magazine articles from the time, or print or on-line encyclopedia articles. With your classmates, create a bulletin board display of fallout shelters and explain it to your classmates. Then, as a class, compare the real fallout shelters with William's.