

J. W. M. MORGAN

Atomic Blizzard

October 1957

Griffith's father, a military engineer, insisted Griffith give up his cartoon watching, come out to the back lawn, and look up with him at the yellow and gray of the clearing evening sky. "We're in trouble," Griffith's father said. "The Soviets have put up an artificial moon."

Sputnik didn't look like an artificial moon to Griffith. It seemed to him the Russians had put a firefly into orbit. As boy and father watched the yellow dot cross the sky, his father told Griffith Sputnik was extremely dangerous. Inside the shiny copper ball could be a hydrogen bomb.

That fall our world changed. Television showed nuclear bombs going off. We learned the word *satellite*. Sputnik circled quietly but Russian bombers and submarines threatened to wipe out human life. The Presbyterian minister who lived across the street planned to dig a fallout shelter. His wife lined up jugs of drinking water on shelves in their basement, along with quilts, toilet paper, and cans of beans. The TV showed good-looking pilots *scramble* from their bunks and run to their fighter jets. Scramble, like eggs.

"Are *we* going to dig a fallout shelter?" Griffith asked his father as they drove to the Episcopalian church. His father would not discuss life after nuclear war. We must stay a step ahead of the enemy's evil creativity, he said. They might put germs in our drinking water. They could sabotage our rain. There were spies with tiny cameras among us. One had probably installed a listening device in the low-rent apartment building across the street from Griffith's father's workplace.

Griffith vowed to help. Like his father he would never rest. He would work night and day, devote his life to scientific understanding, and create great weapons. We would protect our tranquil neighborhoods.

The floor of Griffith's bedroom shook. Griffith heard his father swear. Griffith went out in the hall and looked over the banister. His father heaved the front hall radiator forward and back. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" he yelled.

Griffith helped his father take apart their conked-out TV on the dining room table. "Burned out capacitor," his father grumbled. He rotated the vaned device the size of a teacup in his fingers. Made in Indiana, he said. Not particularly well. American manufacturing slipups angered him. Shoddy factory work had often hampered the fight against the Germans.

Griffith's father nipped a wire in his teeth and heated the soldering iron. Griffith asked the question he'd been saving up, "Why is 'comrade' a bad word?" His father winced. He pressed a wire into place and applied solder—the air stank of hot flux. We had to respect the Russians' skill, he said. The Russians were extremely bright and sadly devoted to their mistaken cause. How crazy were they? We didn't know. They might sacrifice the planet to win the Cold War.

America had launched a satellite, too, Explorer—smaller than Sputnik and not as good. We were losing the race. Griffith drew Uncle Sam running beside the Russian bear across a glacier. Uncle Sam had forgotten to tie his shoes. He risked a fatal tripping.

Griffith biked to the waterworks, a chilly wooded area at the northern edge of town. Abundant snowmelt from surrounding mountains flowed through the underground aquifer and emerged here in springs. Water bubbled out the open end of a pipe hammered into the ground—a wonderful fountain powered eternally by the earth's inner pressure.

"We must be grateful for these gifts," Griffith's first-grade teacher had said. Griffith drank sweet water from the open pipe. He dropped belly-down on a cold granite outcrop and plunged his arm deep into an icy pool. Mud and dead leaves settled over his hand. His arm soon ached from the cold but he remained silent and still. An orange salamander crawled from the muck. Griffith caught the salamander by the tail and lifted him into the air as a trophy. The salamander continued his awkward hinged walking. Griffith laughed. He set the salamander free on the matted leaves.

When he left the woods he squinted at the white contrail of a jet. Identifying military planes used to be a hobby. Now the jets flew too high. Some people had spotted the satellite during daylight.

“They’ve outfoxed us,” Griffith’s father said. Our clever plans had failed. The Russians now had *female* bomber pilots. Their high-pitched radio transmissions would not trigger our alarms. We needed months to correct the circuits. Meanwhile we were vulnerable.

Griffith prepared to die. Late at night, alone in his bed, he saw rolling New Hampshire hills blackened like charcoal briquettes, dairy cows seared on the hoof, the waterworks boiled to sparkling vapor.

In Griffith’s nightmare, radioactive vines erupted through the side yard’s floor of dead leaves. The vines creaked like straining rigging as they wrapped around and enclosed the house. Their probing tips whirled in the moonlight, seeking their next support. The vines lifted the three windows, then popped the glass. These vines of death spread across his floor and overwhelmed his furniture. The chilly white tendrils covered his mouth and nose. They entered his ears and penetrated his brain. They went down his pajamas pants and enclosed his most delicate parts.

Griffith was surprised to wake up.

February 1958

A great blizzard blanketed our region, a storm so vast and powerful that TV announcers were reduced to reverent whispers. The hand-drawn weather map on the television screen looked like somebody had socked North America in the face and raised a colossal black eye which continued to swell, discolor, and sag. Outside, cars disappeared beneath a cover of white. All over town, people closed off extra rooms and huddled beside radiators and made phone calls only in emergencies. Even snow plows got stuck.

Griffith’s father said an enemy weather experiment had gone wrong in Siberia and caused the great blizzard.

Griffith understood. The world was ruined.

He pulled down his hat, tightened his scarf over his face, and went out into the frigid morning with no expectation of returning. Snow gathered at his neck and clumped at his wrists and ankles as he walked.

His boots squeaked in the cold, dry snow. He walked five miles, out of town, far beyond any houses or side streets. He climbed a low, rock fence and walked across

an open, snow-covered field that was bordered in the distance by tall pines. His steps made the first marks in the broad field.

He sat in the snow, then lay back. He felt his hooded head cradled by the fresh, firm snow. He looked straight up at the white sky. He was strict with himself now. His mind was blessedly empty. He felt cool and clean. He had no future and no past and nothing was bothering him.



J. W. M. MORGAN'S fiction has appeared in *Willard & Maple*, *The Distillery*, *Pearl*, *Spire*, *The South Dakota Review*, *Mars Hill Review*, *Licking River Review*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Cadillac Cicatrix*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Permafrost*, *Interim*, *Innisfree*, *Talon Magazine*, and other magazines. He won the 2006 Spire Press Flash Fiction Contest. He is an assistant editor at Narrative Magazine.