

ANTHONY J. MOHR

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## Invasion USA

A fight broke out while Valerie and I played in her backyard. It was the spring of 1952, I was five and the sun was out. The newscaster's voice that came through her den window said the "fight could lead to a third world war." This had to be make-believe. But Valerie believed the announcement. Her hands flew to her cheeks, and her mouth became an oval. "A war," she said. "People could get hurt." I was old enough to know what a war was. Our game of Let's Pretend was over.

I ran from Valerie's yard and raced up Hazeltine Avenue, past the twelve houses that separated her place from mine. When I got home, Mom gave me her beauty contest smile and a hug. A war had not started, she promised, at least not in the San Fernando Valley, where we lived. She said that Korea, the place the announcer most likely was talking about, was far from California, and I had nothing to be afraid of.

But I was frightened—of Russia, Stalin, Communists, A-bombs—words I constantly heard on the radio in my mother's Plymouth and the TV in our living room. Even President Truman looked nervous on our Philco the night I heard him say, "Mr. Stalin." Behind the circles of his eyeglasses, the President's black-and-white face seemed too taut, despite his efforts to sound tough. More than once I heard someone say, "Stalin's A-bombs" (probably Edward R. Murrow, I'd learn years later) and heard Senator Joseph McCarthy say, "Communist." McCarthy spat it out as "commonist," and the word sounded menacing. My friend Chuck's father said a Communist lived on our block. He gave no details. He just knew it.

Thanks to Mr. Stalin, fear crept around our neighborhood and leeches into my house, affecting even my father, Gerald Mohr, the actor with the thick black hair and the level look who had danced with Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*; and Dad wasn't afraid of anything. One night when he must have thought I was asleep, he said, "The atom bomb has been dropped on the United States of America." Again and again, my father gave the locations of three nuclear explosions, as though he were delivering a news bulletin.

Most of my classmates at Sherman Oaks Elementary School did not seem scared of war. They behaved like the young of a victorious nation that had yet to lose one. Even their kindergarten jargon made combat sound like fun. "Helldivers," Jimmy said, when he hit the tetherball. Our teacher probably knew Jimmy was thinking of "Dauntless" dive bombers, and she never accused him of swearing. Bobby and John played "Bombs over Tokyo" at recess, but it was the bomb drills in class that I remember. Drop—cover the face with your left forearm, use the right hand to pull your shirt over the neck.

Crouched under my desk, I didn't know what to think. Dad was not preparing me to go to war, not with my doting mother and jumpy Grandma Henny in the house. He didn't own guns; he didn't buy me toy soldiers. I never saw a battlefield; Southern California lay far from the Shilohs and Saratogas. Dad had been drafted after Pearl Harbor but served his country at an army studio near Santa Ana, where he had acted in radio dramas like *Wings to Victory*.

Sometimes when it rained and I couldn't play outside, I sat on a window seat in the living room and listened to his wartime shows, which had been preserved on black, glass records. I absorbed the *ack-ack* of artillery and the howl of shot-up planes before they crashed. No one helped me with the history, because no one listened to the records with me. Those dark afternoons, I doubt that anyone knew what I was doing. Dad was at the studio or upstairs 'studying my lines,' Mom was cooking, and Grandma lay in bed with her diathermy machine on. She said it generated heat for her arthritis, but that black contraption contained more dials and meters than the dashboards of my parents' cars.

One night at dinner, in the middle of boring adult conversation, Dad said, "invasion USA." His tone shifted with the phrase. Always so suave, my father acted worried. So did my mother, whose blue eyes were normally calm. My grandmother also looked serious, but then Grandma always behaved as though enemies surrounded our half acre, prepared to storm our house and overrun the granny flat in back, where she lived. I started to ask if the Russians had attacked, but before the question was out, Dad told me to stop interrupting. He was in a bad mood, and so,

cycling between confusion and fear, I listened and rolled my green peas around the plate until, moments later, the conversation drifted to another subject.

Several days later, Dad said, "invasion USA," again and added that Russian planes would bomb New York City. We had relatives there: Grandma Sadie, Uncle Dick, Aunt Nanette, Uncle Carl, and my cousins Jeff and Warren. This time I sat quietly and didn't ask for an explanation. I'd wait until one of those weekend days when my father took me to the barbershop and we got haircuts together or we drove to the location of his latest western and went horseback riding. Sometimes he took me on the roller coaster at Pacific Ocean Park, where getting scared was so much fun. Yet when those rare days arrived, I never raised the subject of invasions. We'd talk about other things. It was my chance to explain my life, for he didn't seem to have a good understanding of it. "Are you in 1-A or 1-B?" he'd ask several months later, when I entered the first semester of the first grade. "B-1," I said, wondering why my father didn't know the proper terminology. But at least we were together and talking. That made me happy, and I didn't want Stalin's A-bombs to wreck our time together.

Nor did I seek answers from Mom when she read to me. Listening to her mimic *Freddy the Detective* was too pleasant to spoil. Maybe I feared what she'd say. More likely, I was embarrassed to say I was afraid of Stalin, just as I was afraid to admit that I liked Lindsey Handley, the prettiest girl in my class, who always wore her blonde hair in a ponytail. So I wondered silently if A-bombs would fall on our house.

I dreamed that they did. Soviet planes appeared over Sherman Oaks, coming on slowly, in formation. They looked like the jets I saw on television, but now each fuselage was thousands of feet long. They obscured the sky and poured out A-bombs like sand from my toy dump truck. Thousands of big-finned ovals with the letter *A* painted on them smashed into the lawn, the slide on my jungle gym, and my tree house in the orchard. The jets whined as loudly as the sirens from fire trucks on Ventura Boulevard. Mrs. Hutchinson, the old widow who lived next door, screamed for help as did Mary and Joy, the two fifth graders who lived across the street.

LA's yellow sky was empty the next morning. No bombs had struck the lawn. My jungle gym was unharmed, as were our peach tree, our lemon tree, and the red brick incinerator against the corner fence. No bombers appeared that day, or during the weeks that followed. School let out and summer vacation passed in peace. Chuck and I played baseball in the street. He said his dad was going to vote for "Ike and Dick." My father was home a little more often. He planned to vote for

Adlai Stevenson, but didn't say why. One night, my father made a deal with me: If I'd let him read in peace for an hour, we would play with the invisible monkey that lived in the drawer of the small desk next to Dad's favorite living room chair. When I returned sixty long minutes later, he opened the drawer and said, "Psst," followed by, "There he goes." Dad pointed to the ceiling and kept saying, "Psst psst psst." I could have sworn I heard the little creature swing from one beam to another. Moments later, it hopped back into the drawer, and my father resumed his book.

Each day between four and five, when the San Fernando Valley baked and even the metal chains that held my swings got too hot, the Good Humor man drove his white truck past my house. I listened to the fifteen happy notes of his theme song and no longer scanned the sky. Sometimes after Mom bought me a Popsicle, I'd walk down to Valerie's house. Valerie had started wearing her light brown hair in a flip. I wasn't too young to notice her flawless, olive skin, light eyes, and musical voice. And she still liked to pretend. A day with Valerie was a good day. We created little neighborhoods in her backyard, laying out the streets with pebbles, and building houses of twigs and wood chips. She made sure to include a school. I added a gas station. One afternoon, in a nearby vacant lot, Valerie and I found a concrete block that must have weighed a ton. We lugged this piece of rubble back to her yard and imagined it was the tallest building in our little world.

Dad's world may not have been as little as mine, but it was just as fictive. *Invasion USA* was a B movie about an A-bomb attack on America. My father played a newscaster, the starring role. Maybe I should have known my parents had been discussing a film. After all, fantasy pervaded our house, right down to the invisible monkey. But I had yet to make a reliable distinction between fact and fiction. Earlier that year I had seen *The Duel at Silver Creek*, a movie in which my father gets killed, and it took at least an hour for my mother to calm me down. When Dad talked about bombing New York, I thought he was describing a real war as opposed to—what? A bad set of rushes that day? That was it; I mistook the Russians for the rushes, the unedited film the crew watches after a shoot. But Dad said "the Russians" again several nights later, clearly this time, and then he said "invasion."

Shortly after school resumed, Robert, another boy on our block, came over to play with Valerie and me. He was tall, a couple of years older, with sandy hair and an open face. He liked telling stories and he assembled words in a clever manner that made Valerie laugh and made me jealous. Robert put his vivid imagination on display that Halloween. When his front door creaked open—Robert must have used a string because he was hiding somewhere—all we saw was darkness. His disembodied voice said, "Come in and get your treats." Chuck, Valerie, and I felt

the threads that hung low across the entry to the dining room, where he had put the candy bowls. We took our Snickers and Mars Bars, and into the black void, Valerie said, "Thank you, Robert." When we returned to Chuck's Cotswold cottage house and gushed to his father about the experience, he warned us not to go back there because Robert's father was the Communist he had told us about.

My parents assured me that Robert's father, Frederic Rinaldo, was not a Communist. He wrote comedies, including three that had starred Abbott and Costello. One was familiar to me: *Bud Abbott and Lou Costello Meet Frankenstein*. I wanted to believe my parents, but if Robert's father wasn't a Red—the label Chuck's father had used—why couldn't he write scripts anymore? The term blacklist would not enter my vocabulary until the fifth grade, and I wouldn't absorb the full story until at least the eighth. I saw Robert after that night but not often, and I never met his dad.

The day before Thanksgiving, a black-and-white photo lay on the coffee table when I got home from school. My father was hunched up against a wall. His eyes were closed; his face was blood smeared. The blonde woman who clung to him with her fleshy white arms was not my mother. Next to them a huge piece of concrete tilted, blasted out of the building. Yet the woman's lipstick remained perfectly applied to her parted lips. She wore an evening gown; Dad, a pinstripe suit. His tie was loose. At first I thought my father was in agony, but the expression on his face could have been a smile. Something told me I was looking at nothing real, but I wasn't sure, and seeing him with this blonde confused me.

Of course this eight and a half by eleven glossy was a studio publicity shot for *Invasion USA*. Maybe Mom told me that when she came into the living room and saw me gaping at it. Whether or not she did, the image lasted. You don't forget seeing your father bleed when you're a child, even if it's only a movie. Looking at that publicity shot from the vantage point half a century provides, I am certain my dad had enjoyed playing in the rubble with his costar, Peggie Castle. But when I first saw it, I thought that one of Stalin's A-bombs had hit him. Or did I? The image tangled my childhood mind. Was Dad really hurt? He had never appeared wounded at dinner. I always wondered why he failed to explain what *Invasion USA* was or, at least, hide that photo. But such thoughts only occur to today's parents, who give their kids more attention. The children of 1952 had been left free to figure out the real world on our own, and having an actor as a father made that task harder.

*Invasion USA* opened two weeks later, on December 10, 1952. My parents never took me to see it, probably a wise decision. Columbia's advertising strategy had been to frighten the life out of people. *It will scare the pants off you*, screamed one

of their posters. They even wanted the City of Los Angeles to turn on the air raid sirens before the premiere.

Years later, after A-bombs had been upgraded to H-bombs, after the Cold War passed and so did my father, I saw *Invasion USA*. Its plot was simple: The Russians win but the moment they do, the war turns out to be a dream, make-believe. I wish Dad had told me that when I was five, for we could have pretended together. While Valerie and I built ersatz towns, my father reported that cities had been leveled. Indeed both our worlds were on film, mine in pictures taken with my Brownie and his in theaters as well as the glossy on our coffee table.

The movie is full of stock World War II footage and miniature sets that blow up. Safe at home, surrounded by friends with whom I had spent a good day in the sun, I chuckled at the actors who portrayed the Russians as ugly uniformed thugs spouting propaganda with overheated Slavic accents. “The People’s Government of America will take the wealth from the greedy, the speculator, and the capitalistic bourgeoisie.” The campy script also gave my father come-on lines such as, “The last time I met a girl I liked, they bombed Pearl Harbor.” But my grin evaporated, and I felt the role of a confused little boy when Dad broadcast the bulletin that I had believed: “There have been official reports of three A-bomb drops...”



**ANTHONY J. MOHR’S** work has appeared in, among other places, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Coachella Review*, *Word Riot*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Eclectica*, and various anthologies ranging from *Chicken Soup for the Soul* to *Workers Write!* By day he is a judge on the Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles.