

# Fallout

Donald A. Ranard

**T**he day that no one in Patsy Busey's six-grade class would ever forget began with Dwayne Hickenbottom's show-and-tell on fallout shelters. Even the boys in the back of the class, normally slouched down in their seats, too cool to care, sat up and paid attention. It was October 1957, and the Russians had just launched Sputnik. Only Howard, the class know-it-all, understood what Sputnik was, but everybody knew what it meant—at any moment the Russians might drop a nuclear bomb on downtown Florence, Virginia, population 987. Even if the blast didn't kill you, the fallout would, and that was a *worse* way to die—your hair fell out, you got blisters all over your body, and you died a slow, painful death. Your only chance for survival was a fallout shelter, which no one in town had, though Old Man Staggs was rumored to have built an underground bunker on his property outside of town stocked with enough food and water to last a year.

Dwayne, a farm boy with a sly wit and a slow delivery, held up a three-panel cardboard display. The first panel showed two shelters: a \$27.50 foxhole and a \$299 room with an army cot and a card table. On the second panel was a \$2,000 "deluxe" steel-and-concrete underground apartment, with built-in bunkbeds, a bathroom with shower and toilet, a refrigerator, and a short-wave radio. The kitchen was farmhouse cozy, with a checkerboard cloth covering the table, and wooden shelves stocked with canned food. There was a Geiger counter to check for fallout that might seep in. The last panel featured a Life photo essay, "Fallout

Can Be Fun," about a newlywed couple who'd spent their honeymoon in a shelter fifteen feet under the ground.

"Oh, yeah, and there's this too," Dwayne said. He held up a chain necklace with a metal ID tag. "It's a dog tag. But it ain't for dogs!" It came in the mail, he said, with an ad for a one-time-only \$1.99 special. A drawing showed a smiling mom in a summer dress handing her happy son a necklace. Dwayne held up another piece of paper. It was a letter from the government that came with the tags. He read slowly, pronouncing each syllable: "The tags provide a means of permanent identification, capable of withstanding the modern methods of attack, for the purpose of facilitating speedy and accurate post-attack notification of next of kin." A small smile twitched the corners of Dwayne's mouth. "What that means is you might get burnt to a crisp, but your dog tag won't."

"So, boys and girls, what did we learn from Dwayne's presentation?" Mrs. B asked, after Dwayne had returned to his seat.

From the back of the room, Jerry Jerome blurted out, "We learned we might get burnt to a crisp, but that's okay, 'cause our dog tags won't."

The laughter was cut short by a siren. It started with a low growl then rose to a high-pitched wail.

Mrs. B looked startled.

Students glanced around nervously. *This is just a drill, right?*

Mrs. B regained her composure. "All right, children," she said. "You know what to do—duck and cover, just like we practiced."

Students huddled under their desks, waiting for the siren to stop, or the world to end.

"Pssst! Ricky!" It was Dwayne, grinning and pointing at Margaret Needlemeier under the desk in front of him. Ricky stared at Dwayne. What was that drooling halfwit doing now? Then he got it: Dwayne Hickenbottom was looking up Margaret Needlemeier's dress.

When they climbed back into their seats, one desk was empty. It belonged to the new kid in class, a French girl from Canada some of the boys had nicknamed "Oui Oui," because those were the only words anyone had ever heard her utter in the week she'd been in school. Now she lay curled up in a ball, her little fists clenching the metal legs of her desk. "Oh," said Laura Lee, covering her mouth. Students gathered around, staring down at a puddle seeping out from under Oui Oui's dress.

"Oui Oui went wee wee," Jerry Jerome said, out of the corner of his mouth. Some of the boys snickered. Laura Lee gave Jerry Jerome a dirty look. *What an idiot.*

"Everyone, back to your seats," Mrs. B said. She kneeled down beside the girl. "You can come up now, honey," she said. "It's all over." Oui Oui didn't move. "Anne-Marie, honey, you can let go now," Mrs. B said, gently trying to pry open her fists, and then not so gently, but there was nothing she could do to get Oui Oui to relax her grip. For that, she needed Mrs. Ledford, the school nurse, and then after the two of *them* failed ("*Man*, she's strong," Dwayne said admiringly), they called in the principal, the ever-chipper, can-do Henry "Happy" Camper, who ended each morning's PA

announcements with the words “Remember, boys and girls, success comes in cans, not cannots.” For a moment, it seemed Mr. Camper had met his match, and the only way Oui Oui was going to leave the room was attached to her desk.

“Remember, Mr. Camper, success comes in cans, not cannots,” Dwayne deadpanned. Mr. Camper’s face darkened. The students watched, transfixed—were they about to witness a different Mr. Camper?—but the moment passed, and the old Mr. Camper returned. “You’re absolutely right, young man,” he said. The three adults conferred and came up with a plan. Mrs. B held down Oui Oui’s feet, while Mr. Camper pried a hand from the desk leg, one finger at a time, then gave the freed hand to Mrs. Ledford and went to work on the other one. Oui Oui was finally pried loose, and Mr. Camper and Mrs. Ledford carried her out of the room, still curled up in a tight ball.

They never saw her again.

**Donald A. Ranard's** writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Every Day Fiction*, *100 Word Story*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Best Travel Writing 2005*, and elsewhere. The son of a diplomat, he grew up in Japan, Malaya, and Korea and has worked in Asia, Europe, and Latin America as a teacher, refugee assistance specialist, and editor. He lives in Arlington, VA.