

THE DIEFENBAKER PAMPHLET

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SUSAN PRICE POURED COFFEE into Daniel's favourite mug, a thin-lipped piece of brown-speckled pottery that she had bought for him seventeen years earlier on the occasion of their first Christmas together. She set it down on the table near the newspaper that her husband was reading. His eyes did not move to the mug. They were fixed on the page in fear and disgust.

"Would you believe it, Susan?" he asked, without offering to elaborate.

"What's in the news today?" she replied, deftly walking the line between cheerfulness and thoughtful concern.

"Oh, nothing. Just another earthquake overseas. Another foreign dictatorship with nuclear weapons. Another string of tornadoes ripping through the US. I tell you, Susan ... I tell you."

"The world is an ever-changing place," she offered.

"Ever-changing for the worse, it seems. Always for the worse."

He noticed the mug of coffee in front of him and picked up the matching cream pitcher, a follow-up gift from sixteen Christmases before.

"The real question," he added, "is what's being done to protect us from all of this?" He watched the cream billow and swirl into the black of his coffee in complex patterns of force and resistance, the results of which were momentarily beautiful until they subsided into a homogeneity of light brown. "Nobody's concerned about safety anymore. Back when the Cold War was on, it was all anybody talked about, wasn't it? Everybody was always preparing for the worst."

"That's true," Susan agreed.

"Now that Russia's calmed down, they all feel safe. But what about China? Iran? North Korea? What about tidal waves? Earthquakes, hurricanes? Shouldn't we be preparing ourselves? Shouldn't everyone?"

While he sipped at his coffee, Susan wondered if an answer was expected. "It can be difficult," she ventured, "to prepare for the unknown."

“Difficult, certainly,” he replied, “but necessary.” He sipped again, trying to decide just what he was suggesting. The phone rang. “This early on a Saturday?”

Susan answered. “Oh, good morning, Doris! Yes, he’s right here.” She held out the phone for her husband.

“Hello, Mother! What has you up so early this morning?” The pleasant lines arching across his forehead dissolved into a flat and placid expression, then stooped into a furrow. “What’s wrong, Mother? Why are you crying? Tell me what’s happened.” There was a pause, like the weightless moment at the apex of a jump, and then the furrow tightened and his eyes clamped shut, squeezing a tear from each corner.

Susan was able to deduce that Doris had just become a widow.

The drive across town was sad and awkward. Susan was not sure how to comfort her husband, and he was not sure how to properly express his grief.

“Why now?” he kept asking.

She considered reminding him that his father had been eighty-seven years old, so in that sense it was hardly a surprise, but she realized that this would sound callous. She thought of suggesting that he was now in a better place, but she knew better than to reopen their decades-long debate about whether there was an afterlife. That conversation had never led to agreement, and had often descended into self-righteous hostility.

Susan did not say anything during the drive, and Daniel simply repeated his question every few minutes, as though the answer was almost within reach. “Why now?”

When they arrived at Doris’s house, they found her calm and seated in her usual armchair. The obvious vacancy of the matching chair beside it offered a subtle shock. The room looked as though everything was in place except for his father.

“Hello, dear,” said his mother. “I’m sorry to have called you in such a state. I’m feeling much better now.”

“Don’t apologize, Mum. You deserve to be upset.”

“Oh, nonsense. Tears won’t change a thing, you know.”

“Of course not,” Daniel answered, “but you need time to process what’s happened.”

“He wasn’t a young man, Daniel. Today is not the first time that death has entered my mind. We’ve had plenty of time to process the idea.”

Daniel let out a small breath and shook his head. “I can hardly believe he’s not here anymore.”

“Yes, well, I imagine it’s probably best for us to swallow that truth and move forward.”

“Doris ...” Susan began, but found that she had nothing to say.

“Yes, Susan, dear. I know. It’s very kind of you.”

Daniel made his way to the mantle and picked up a thick black frame. It contained an ancient wedding photo in sepia tones, his father dressed in military uniform and his mother in a handsome skirt and jacket. Her face was partially obscured by the veil that hung from the brim of her hat. His father’s face could be clearly seen, and Daniel could easily detect the valour in his gaze.

“He was a good man, Mum. He’ll be missed.”

“Of course, dear, yes, he will.”

“And you know that we’ll take care of everything.”

“Oh yes, I know that, son.”

“We’ll arrange for someone to check in on you here, to help with the housework and the cooking.”

“Oh heavens, no, Daniel, that wouldn’t make sense. I can’t live here by myself.”

“But wouldn’t you rather stay in your own home?”

“Of course a part of me would, but no, I can’t do it on my own. I can barely move from room to room without your father’s help. He did the laundry and the cooking, and everything here would only remind me of him anyway. No, it makes more sense for me to move to Chestnut Acres. We had our spot reserved for this type of situation.”

“Are you sure, Mum?”

“The time is right. It’ll be a fresh start.”

“Well if you’re okay with it, then I guess we’re behind you, aren’t we, Susan?”

“Absolutely,” Susan agreed. “Whatever makes you most comfortable.”

“I’d certainly feel safer,” said Doris. “But I’ll need some help going through our things, if you don’t mind, Daniel.”

“Of course,” he replied.

He spent the afternoon in the basement sorting boxes of papers. Tax documents and pay stubs, mostly. Some of the boxes contained magazine subscriptions from as far back as 1964. One box was full of pamphlets, ranging in subject from local political campaigns to miracle hair products. A booklet caught his eye. It was titled “Your Basement Fallout Shelter: Blueprint for Survival No. 1.” The pale blue cover featured a line drawing of a small house.

The illustrator had lent the viewer the ability to see through the hillside and into the basement below, revealing cinder-block walls lined with shelves and bunk beds.

At first Daniel thought that there was a storm cloud drawn above the house, with drops of rain showering down on the roof, but he soon realized that the white flecks were not raindrops, but rather the artist's rendition of nuclear fallout. The cloud was in fact the upper portion of a nuclear explosion happening up the street. Although Daniel thought that the illustration did not accurately portray the scene of a nuclear disaster, he felt compelled to lift the cover. The signature at the bottom of the foreword read "Rt. Hon. John G. Diefenbaker, Prime Minister." His interest expanded.

"The shelter described in this book," wrote Diefenbaker, "although not affording protection against the blast of a nuclear explosion or the fires that may result, will provide good protection against the more widespread radiation danger. These shelters will be a practical and reasonable means of insuring one's family against this risk that would arise should a war occur. Each householder can and should decide whether or not to have this form of family protection. I recommend it."

Daniel turned to the first section, called "Why a Fallout Shelter?" and read on. "The shelter design will allow you to live without fear of radiation or harmful fumes generated within the shelter."

To live without fear, he thought. Diefenbaker sure knew how to appeal to his audience. Daniel found himself craving the same kind of deliverance from fear that the original readers must have felt. The idea that a set of instructions would save them from impending doom must have offered great relief.

He flipped ahead to page 15, "Building Sequence," and noticed a hand-drawn asterisk beside the title. He flipped ahead again, and then again. A whole section of the booklet was filled with dollar figures and measurements in his father's handwriting. Daniel reasoned that these must have been plans for a project that never materialized.

He wanted to keep reading, but he knew that it was time to get back home. Susan had been left to converse with his mother for several hours by this time. He could continue the sorting later.

He tucked the booklet into his jacket pocket as he left.

Funerals can be a difficult business. A balance must be struck between heartbreak and solemnity. Even the way a person smiles must be strictly

controlled, conveying both gratitude and sorrow in a single muted grimace, before accepting a handshake or hug from a well-meaning attendee. Daniel tried to maintain this balance with grace, raising and hanging his head at the appropriate moments until his father was lowered into the ground. When the occasion was over and he was driving his mother back to the care facility, it was a relief to be able to ease that controlled tension in his face. Conveying emotional restraint for hours had been tiring. Now he could return his mind to the things that were of immediate interest to him: the following day's meeting with the realtor about selling his parents' property; moving the last few items from the house to the facility; and further reading of the fallout shelter pamphlet.

It was two weeks later when Susan, pouring milk on her Bran Flakes, heard the insistent beep of a flatbed truck backing into their gravel driveway. It was loaded with cinder blocks and lumber, and her husband was guiding the driver into position. Looking out the window, she scrunched her face, unable to decipher the scene before her. She finished breakfast and brushed her teeth, then grabbed her things as she stepped out to go to work. Daniel was still talking to the driver, negotiating the specifics of how the hydraulic lift would manoeuvre the first pallet of cinder blocks. She wanted to ask, but he seemed preoccupied, so she slid into her car.

Daniel was understandably excited. He had gone to great lengths to plan his project. The Diefenbaker pamphlet had been a helpful guide, but he'd felt that certain upgrades were necessary in light of the technological advances that had taken place since its publication.

Today, he would begin phase one: the acquisition of basic supplies and partial excavation of the basement. It was a small unfinished area with a dirt floor, only six feet deep, but he planned to make that ten. This would allow for a solid roof layer without making the end product feel small. If any substantial amount of time was to be spent down there, ceiling height would have a huge impact on their comfort, and if Susan were to be uncomfortable, then he would consider the entire project a failure.

He went down and removed one of the basement windows, then slid some long planks into position to serve as a ramp. He set up a freestanding rope and pulley outside the basement window and wove one end of the rope through the riveted holes of a heavy tarp. Unfortunately, there was no equipment rental that could help him downstairs. The only option was to fetch his

long-handled shovel from the shed and get to work the old-fashioned way. Load after load, he piled dirt from the floor onto the tarp and slid it up the ramp using the pulley. It was backbreaking work, but Daniel had always been the type to go at things with determination once he had an idea in his head. By late afternoon he was about three quarters of the way through the job.

When Susan arrived home, the first thing she noticed was the series of dirt mounds beside the house. Then she saw the large pulley system just outside the basement window. Her confusion deepened when the pulley sprang to life and a moment later the rope dragged out a heavy tarp loaded with dirt. It reached the end of the ramp and flopped over clumsily, spilling its contents onto the nearest pile. There were two other piles slightly to the side of the main one, as if someone had shovelled the early accumulation out of the way so that progress could continue. A hand reached out the window to grab the tarp and shake it around before pulling it back into the basement.

“Daniel?” Susan asked. “Is that you?”

“Susan!” he shouted, clearly out of breath and thankful for the opportunity to pause his labour. “My dear! So happy you’re home! How was your day?”

“Fine,” she replied.

“Excellent.”

“And you, I see you’re ... busy.”

“Yes, quite busy,” he said. “I’ve been at it all day. I think I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, though, Susan. I’ve almost finished Phase One.”

She stepped around the dirt mound and bent down so she could see in the window. It was an odd thing to see her husband so far underground, his sleeves rolled up and dirt smeared across his face and forearms.

“I’m aiming for ten feet,” he explained. “It was only six before. Not nearly deep enough to be comfortable.”

“I see,” Susan answered. “And what about ...” She looked over at the palettes of cinder blocks and lumber. “What about these supplies, Daniel?”

“Oh yes. I’m sorry, dear. I forgot that I haven’t explained any of this to you. I’m building us an emergency shelter.”

“A shelter?”

“Yes,” said Daniel. “A refuge in case of disaster.”

“What disaster?” Susan asked.

“Exactly,” said Daniel. “It could be anything. We won’t know. Now, certainly, this won’t protect against every conceivable emergency, but I think

my design will do a fine job of keeping us alive and relatively comfortable during most catastrophic circumstances.”

“But Daniel, the cost of all this—”

“Yes, it is going to cost a bit, but then you can’t really put a price on safety, can you? I’ll finish up down here in the next hour or so, and then I’ll get washed up for dinner. See you soon, dear!”

Susan backed away from the window, speechless. She was quite sure that they couldn’t afford this project, and Daniel really ought to have consulted with her before making these large purchases. She wanted to return to the basement window and express her concerns, but she went inside and prepared his dinner. She felt that difficult and controversial opinions were generally better left unspoken, as they tended to sort themselves out naturally.

Doris had settled in nicely at Chestnut Acres. She had found some other tenants whom she had known years before, like Joe Tupper who used to tease her when he worked on her father’s farm as a teenager and Evelyn Collins, who had been a co-worker in the early sixties. She enjoyed their familiar faces, and even enjoyed the drastic ways in which their appearances had changed over time: the deep wrinkles, the elongated earlobes, the spots of brown scattered across their hands and hairlines. They were mirrors for her, reminders that she too had changed this much, that she had conquered so many decades of life.

When Daniel came to visit her after the first week, he seemed tired and distracted, so she inquired.

“Well,” he answered, “I’ve been a little preoccupied lately. It’s something I’m really excited about.”

“And what is that, dear?”

“I’m building an insurance policy. The greatest insurance policy I could think of. I’ve dug out our basement, Mum. I’ve ordered all the supplies. I’m building a shelter.”

“For what?”

“For us,” he explained. “For me and Susan.”

“When will you need it?” she asked. “What is it for?”

“It’s for anything. If something dangerous happens, we’ll be comfortable and protected. It’ll be airtight and watertight. It’s going to have an air filtration system, temperature controls, a radiation monitor, and food and supplies to last us for months.”

In the face of her silence, he felt a sudden need to justify.

“Haven’t you ever noticed that the number of threats to our safety has only ever gone up, never down? Being unprepared for disaster is taking a huge risk.”

“I don’t disagree with you. That’s why I made my own plans. That’s why I’m here.”

“Exactly,” he said.

“But at the same time, I might caution you.”

“Caution me?”

“Yes,” she said. “Against your own zeal.”

Daniel’s eyes widened. His mouth opened a crack, but he had no words to put in it.

“You should be careful,” his mother continued, “not to become the danger yourself. Passion can drive a person to do great things, but it can also consume him.” She kissed him on the forehead. “Love your wife,” she said. “She is what’s important.”

This thought resonated with him. After a while, the notion became dense, like a heavy fog, then congealed into a thick syrupy liquid, and finally hardened into a solid conceptual block. By the time he got out of the car, he had decided what to make of the advice. Loving his wife was, after all, what the shelter was all about. And he was so far into the project already that it hardly made sense to quit anyway. He allowed his conviction to be renewed.

And so a month went by. The materials on the palettes disappeared piece by piece, absorbed into the basement. In an effort to finish the project quickly and return their lives to normal, he spent every available hour hard at work. He worked through the weekends. He worked every evening. He took frequent days off work, to speed his progress. The reasons he gave for these absences became less credible as time went on, until he arrived at work and found his supervisor and manager together in his office.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning,” they answered.

They all hovered around the moment.

“Mr. Price,” the manager began, “we need to talk.” The supervisor nodded in agreement. “Your performance of late has been most irregular.”

“Irregular?” Daniel repeated.

“You’ve taken more days off than are permitted, and even when you’re here, you’ve been seen to be engaged in matters unrelated to your work.”

Daniel had no choice but to concede. "I'm very sorry, gentlemen. I've been ... distracted."

The supervisor huffed.

"It won't happen again," Daniel insisted.

"Yes, Price, that's fine to say," said the manager, "but this is not your first reminder."

"No," Daniel said, "It isn't."

"We've had this talk twice before."

"Yes," Daniel said, "I suppose we have."

"So you know why we're meeting here, don't you?"

"I guess you're going to tell me something unpleasant."

"That's right," said the manager. "You leave us no choice."

"Fired?" Daniel asked.

"Fired," the manager replied.

Daniel looked at the floor. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "Very sorry. I had hoped to work here for much longer. I guess it can't be helped, though. I appreciate your time and all."

"And we appreciate you taking the news so well, Price. You're a good man. You'll land on your feet."

"Of course," he said. "Is it effective immediately, or in two weeks? How does this work?"

"It's up to you, really," said the manager.

"Well in that case," Daniel answered, "I suppose I may as well go right now and make the most of the time you've given me."

Daniel shook their hands and went home. He got right to work in the basement, and when Susan came home, he chose not to inform her of the new development, understanding that it would only upset her.

The next week was very productive. The constant movement of his hands kept his disappointment at bay. He put a final seal around the doorway, fixed a minor electrical issue, installed the drawer handles, and finished organizing the canned goods. He wired in the heater, assembled two first aid kits, and made up the beds. The project was nearing completion.

One afternoon he heard Susan's voice faintly through the propped-open shelter door. He went into the basement and approached the window.

"Hello, dear," he said.

"Daniel," she replied. "I don't ... I don't know what ..." Her usual calm had been visibly disturbed.

“What is it, Susan?”

She paused. “The bank called, Daniel. We have no more money.”

He said nothing.

“We’re overdrawn.”

His index finger gently scratched a place on his forehead that was not itchy. “I’m concerned that this isn’t the best time to tell you this, Susan.”

“Tell me what?” she asked.

“It won’t make you calmer.”

“What is it?”

“I mean ... well, I lost my job the other day.”

“You what?” Susan looked as if she had been kicked in the ribs.

“Fired,” he confirmed.

“Fired,” she repeated. “When did this happen?”

“Last week. I didn’t want to upset you.”

“Last week,” she said.

A moment passed, during which Daniel observed his wife’s face.

“Daniel,” she said decisively, after a long time in thought. “This is the last thing that I ever thought I would say to you.”

“Then don’t say it,” he pleaded. He could feel it coming, the thing he didn’t want to hear. It was speeding toward him like a rocket at a hundred miles an hour.

“I’m leaving you.”

“No,” he gasped, the air taken out of his lungs. “This was all for you!” he cried.

“I didn’t ask for any of it.” She walked away.

He stood perfectly still until he heard the car engine start. That confirmed her departure. When he regained his breath he went upstairs to wash his hands and changed his clothes. As he moved about the house, he thought that it had never felt so empty. Everything seemed frail, as though the wind from his movements might knock anything over: a chair, a wall.

He stood at the kitchen counter for a minute or two, wondering what was next. He sighed and returned to the basement. There it was: a giant cement box full of food, bedding, and gadgets.

He walked through the propped-open door and reached casually for the remote that controlled the air filtration system. He turned on the fan and a quiet whirring noise started up. He turned it off again.

Next he checked out the bathroom. He flicked on the light, flushed the toilet, turned the taps on and off again. He opened and closed the medicine

cabinet and nodded with satisfaction. Susan would have been quite pleased with this arrangement, if they had had cause to use it. He wished desperately that she had taken the time to come see it at any point during his progress. She had been putting him off since the beginning, insisting that she would prefer to see the finished product. Well, here it was, a finished product, still unseen by its intended audience.

He flicked off the bathroom light on his way to the supply shelves. They were filled with rows of neatly organized non-perishable food: cans on the lower shelves, boxes higher up. There was a collapsible footstool in the corner to help in reaching those upper shelves. He picked up a can of mandarin oranges from the shelf in front of him and pulled a can opener from a drawer. The new can opener sliced open the lid with uncommon precision. He found a fork and sat on the lower bed to enjoy his snack. It felt good to use the space, to use the fork and the food that he'd so carefully set up. He pretended that he was using them for their imagined purpose. The world outside was burning, smoke and ash lay in the streets. Parents cried out for their children, children cried out for their parents. The sounds of pain and destruction were everywhere.

He set down the can and crossed the shelter to close and lock the door. As he did, the imagined chaos outside suddenly ceased, shut out by the well-sealed enclosure. Enjoying the silence, he returned to his can of oranges and pictured Susan sitting beside him. He held up an orange on the fork as if to offer it to her, shrugged as she declined, and ate it himself. When the oranges were gone and he had drunk the juice, he stared down into the empty can. He stared for almost a full minute, contemplating its emptiness.

He moved the collapsible footstool to the middle of the room. He opened a drawer and felt around between the boxes of matches until he found a thin yellow polypropylene rope. He tied one end around the light fixture and the other end around his neck and launched himself from the stool, and that was the end of it. The neighbours would probably find him in a few days, or, he thought too late, maybe Susan would when she arrived the following day with a promise to work things out.

In his last struggle, he saw the door and remembered with relief that he had locked them all out anyway.