

NOVEMBER 22, 1963

When Halifax department store executive Albert Munro turned the corner at Barrington Street and started up Spring Garden Road, he was walking against an autumn wind that was shedding the last leaves from the port city's trees. Passing the Library, he had to hold his briefcase before his eyes to shield against dust being skirled down the street by the wind. He decided it was a rotten day for his usual walk home from work, and two blocks later, when the first drops of rain were followed almost at once by a downpour, he hurried toward a doorway near a bus-stop to await a drier way of getting home. People rushed past in all directions, all of them trying to avoid getting wet, and all of them fast being drenched. It looked to Albert as though they were PANICKED by the rain. He pulled his collar tight and began to feel uncomfortable as the wind changed and chased rain into his shelter.

Herman Zinck watched an identical scene from his ground-level kitchen window at north Barrington Street. Two men went by with lunch cans under their arms gripped by their soaked clothes. It meant little to him that he was out of it. Two weeks were left before the city would vacate Herman, his wife, and three children from their five-room quarters. The search for a new home was impossibly hampered by Herman's \$40 weekly wages. He knew he had to find something, but that hardly made matters easier. His wife Shirley had become his biggest concern. Her worrying grew daily, and it wasn't right for her to worry like that. Not with another child on the way. So Herman cared little he was out of the storm that caused so much hasty activity in the street opposite.

Lee Sterne lost interest in his magazine in a hurry when he noticed rain coming in through a crack in the window frame and obliterating a mathematics assignment he had finished an hour ago. He looked at the wet blot that disfigured his calculations and cursed loudly. Small good it did to build a modern residence when little things like windows couldn't keep out rain. A bloody multi-million dollar residence and rain came in the windows! "In a hurricane, I'd be floating in here," he thought. Damn poor show when a chap isn't even protected against the elements. He sat at his desk and started to recopy the work.

From the highway running through Hubbards on the Bay Road, you could see William Fraser up on the roof of his barn. He was laying the last sheet of metal when the rain caught and soaked him. He would have worked to finish the job if rain had not made the roof so slippery. He secured the aluminum sheet and made for the ladder. Once down, he closed the barn door and hurried across the yard to the porch of his farm house where he paused before removing his boots and appraised a week's work. It wasn't a bad job. It was one roof that would last a lifetime. His, at least . . .

But the heavy squall that was pouring over Halifax and the south shore of Nova Scotia was of little consequence compared with the political winds shaking the doors of the world. After two years of civil war, the Congolese were still fighting bitterly while the UN — forced earlier to withdraw by threat of bankruptcy — watched in disappointment as the blight spread over the continent. Red China had now consolidated its ill-gained hold on Quemoy and Matsu, and despite presence of an Allied fleet in the area and steady arms shipments to Chiang, the world considered an invasion of Formosa inevitable. Jordan still smarted under restrictions imposed by the Communist coup experts who had seen Hussein dead and his Queen fleeing before they admitted success and set about reorganizing the country. Meanwhile, the Soviets were hard put to make little of an obvious complete deterioration in relations with the Chinese. The world was scarred and pitted at every focus by hotbeds of political dispute.

But the widespread concern once evidenced by a flurry of fallout-shelter building undoubtedly had levelled off. The Allies had sacrificed no caution, and the gravity of the world's health was still critical. Yet, the mild panic had been replaced by a feeling

of the unlikelihood of war. War might come, but it probably wouldn't. Anxiety was dulled by a decade of narrow escapes. Admittedly, it might not always be that way, but to many a constant readiness to dive for shelter at first warning seemed worse than actual attack. They were still frightened. Optimism had simply been born of passage of time.

Such sentiments were almost universal, and it was a fair analysis of the way Haligonians felt. Most had accepted the premise that if war came, the international situation would deteriorate visably enough to permit preparations . . . evacuation and all that!

The assumption was hideously false. For an instant at 6:15 p.m., November 22, 1963, time stood still. Across a city, a nation, a continent, gasps of disbelief from the throats of a race were inaudible under the sirens that screamed as in terror. In Halifax the same screams wailing a steady note of dread reflected off buildings, raced through streets, penetrated and paralyzed. The long warned alert sounded for three minutes. The little city suddenly found itself thrust into the front lines. And the new soldiers were defenceless.

Albert Munro was hanging up his coat in the hall closet and already anticipating a night of rest before the television. His wife was in the kitchen at the stove. The twins were at supper. From his hallway view, it seemed a pleasant enough family sight to greet the tired breadwinner. Albert was at once proud of his family. The sirens caught him amid that thought.

Herman Zinck too was at supper. Shirley was not eating: "It's just a little loss of appetite," she told him when he asked. "Don't get upset — I don't know why I feel this way. Maybe I'm worried about the future. I don't mean just the baby and all that, but I'm frightened about what we're going to do . . ." Herman interrupted and sent the kids from the table.

"I know," he injected without allowing her to finish. "But dammit I can't do any better than I'm doing. I can't look for better work and rooms too. One thing at a time." She had looked like she was about to show tears, and he was annoyed — not so much at her as at himself in being unable to assure a home for his family, who at this moment didn't seem to have much confidence in him. He was about to tell her to stop worrying and being "frightened" and leave their welfare to him when the sirens started.

Lee Sterne had the radio on while he worked, and he heard the wailing above the music. He turned it down to listen. A thought occurred to him that it was the first time the army had tested the sirens at that hour. Usually they sounded in the morning. "Maybe something's wrong with the circuit," he thought, and he turned the radio up again to listen for an announcement. The music had stopped. There was no sound on the air. Then:

There was another pause before a strained voice began; "Ladies and gentlemen, it said: "Listen carefully to this announcement Do not change stations. Leave your radio on for further announcements. The chief of staff of Her Majesty's Armed Forces has ordered an immediate alert. A general attack on the North American continent by the armed forces of the Soviet Union during the next 24 hours is imminent. Immediate evacuation of the city and its surrounding area is advised. Gather your family at once and prepare to leave. Evacuation route information and suggestions for provisions and emergency equipment will follow a message from the Premier of Nova Scotia. Remain calm. Conduct yourself in an orderly fashion. The best possible chance of successful defence against attack with the warning we have is evacuation. The best chance for successful evacuation depends upon absence of panic of any kind. No one will be permitted to enter the city. All exit routes will be used for evacuation. Repeat: Do not turn off your radio. Do not change stations. Directions will be issued over this wave length. Listen carefully and do as your arc told. We will return after this message . . ."

William Fraser, his wife and her father were at the table finishing the evening meal. The radio was not on. 15 miles from the city, air raid sirens were drowned out by the sound of heavy rain. The Frasers continued to discuss next improvement on the farm to which they would devote some of the year's profits.

In minutes, the news had swept the city. Hardly a house but had a radio on listening to directions for packing food, medical supplies, water, blankets, clothing, and general directions for the exodus. If everything went according to plan, said the radio, 60,000 could be evacuated in a matter of a few hours. Those with cars were ordered to make room for those without transportation. The Chief of Police, warning against panic or crime in the haste of evacuation, announced 250 active and reservist policemen had been called on duty. They would, he said, cope with anything that might arise. "with force". Those with relatives in hospitals were told to trust their welfare and safety with hospital staffs.

Until his neighbour had told him differently, Albert Munro, like Lee Sterne, had thought the sirens a test. Now he was loading his car. Luckily, his wife had stopped the day before. He had wasted little time. His wife he ordered to assemble food according to radio directions. One phrase he had caught while not really listening to the radio stuck with him: ". . . You're on your own . . ." He had sent the twins about collecting their clothing. When one demanded more toys and started to cry, he quietly but forcibly halted her protests, and told her to choose one doll to take "on the vacation." Then, he said, they were to help their mother. He finished with the car and started into the house to help his wife when a thought hit him: he was almost out of gas! He knew there was only one thing for it. But he could not bring himself to leave his family to get more. God knows how long he would be. And his wife: he had spotted her crying softly as she gathered supplies in the kitchen. No. He could not leave them alone. They would have to find other transportation.

The men's residence was fast being deserted. People still came bringing static news reports of happenings about the city but left again quickly. Lee knew Halifax was panicking. He had heard of riots in the supermarkets with thousands trying to get food. It was just before payday. Nobody had much cash . . . and the banks were closed. Apparently nobody was about to open them either. So people took what they wanted. He had seen Jack Evans leave a short while before in his car. He was back again, and met Lee in the dining room where everybody seemed to mill around. There was no gas available, Jack told him. Most of the station owners were looking after themselves and their families. While that made little difference to frantic motorists who forced the pumps, it did little good as one by one the filling stations' tanks were emptied. Gas was at a life and death premium. Nobody had enough.

In the heat of the moment, Lee realized he had forgotten his family in New York. They were sure to get it! For the first time, he was afraid. If he had been wondering what to do before, he was no longer in doubt. He ran back to his room to grab a few things and started on a course other students had already taken: get out on the road and find space in someone's car. Outside, a giant writhing snake of cars, trucks, and vehicles of every type and description, was slowing to a halt. As far as he could see, there were lights. Horns bleated. Children screamed in terror at the sudden upheaval of their lives. An army of refugees from the now doomed city streamed close packed down the street and side walks. "I pity them," Lee thought out loud as he watched. "On foot they haven't a chance." Then he realized he was one of them.

Herman Zinck and his two oldest children were in that moving mass passing the residence when Lee Sterne joined it. At one point, the four walked together. Both had an acute anxiety to move faster than the rest, but it was impossible. Herman watched the cars

as they passed carefully. Somewhere, in one of the countless cars leaving the city was his wife and their youngest child. At least she was looked after — if that was what you could term being in a car moving a snail's pace out of the city. All along the route was evidence of the holdup. Frantic citizens had taken to their cars though gas tanks were all but empty. Now they were holding up the lines at intervals. The next cars pushed the stalled derelicts off the road. For the unfortunate families involved, there were two choices left: find space in another car, or join the walkers. Most of them joined the crowd. Occasional policemen could be seen about trying to create some order amid chaos. Few in the crowd made conversation. The dark night of horror was punctuated only by the cries of babies and infants, horns, and the shouting of the anxious.

William Fraser had finally heard the news. He and his wife were already preparing to be of help when the refugees reached them.

If there could be any common thing shared by the fleeing thousands other than desire to escape death, whether they were in cars, trucks, busses, on foot, or those huddling already in their basements, it was a pulsating wonder: WHEN?

The night was clear, crisp. There was no fog, and the sky was filled with stars. The cold body of steel that broke the Atlantic swells two hours later 300 miles off the Nova Scotia coast found the night an interesting but unnecessary aid to navigation.

Albert Munro was in the Johnsons' car . . . people from across the street who had offered room for Albert and his family. The south shore countryside moved past at an agonizing pace. All in the silent car felt the same. It was slow, but they were making progress from certain death.

Herman Zinck had crowded himself and the children with a sweating mass of refugees jammed in a transport van. They had moved a little faster when they had reached the highway for both lanes were being used for the exit. But they slowed again when a traffic jam was encountered at Bedford. Somewhere in the trailer, a woman was praying aloud. From all sides came muted mummings in some kind of verbal accompaniment.

Lee Sterne walked alone, in his mind were thoughts of a family he would never see again. He had reached the rotary, but failed to note his progress.

In the now quietening city, rows of smashed windows, looted stores, and abandoned cars marked the path of frenzy. Articles of every description littered the streets. Any craft that was seaworthy had long since left the harbor with its load. Stocked with cargoes, the wharves and docks stood deserted. The city's lights blinked once, then were off.

Far ahead of the fleeing armada, an ascending blaze marked completion of a mission. There was no time for sirens.

The missile struck south-east of Bedford. Decimation of a world was commencing. Incineration claimed the city of Halifax in seconds. It claimed Lee Sterne, Herman Zinck, his children, and his wife, who had been only two cars behind the van. It claimed all others seeking escape, but caught too near.

Albert Munro, William Fraser and their families saw the multi-embazoned explosion in the night, and minutes later felt the earth lurch. At once, on all sides, there was holocaust. They lived, for the present.

The millions of tons of pulverized earth, stones, buildings and other materials that had been a city were drawn up into the fireball.

80 miles away and 70,000 feet up, a lone pilot saw it all.

"God help them," he said.

— Brian Backman