

Stephanie Bowgett

THE DAY THE WAR BEGINS

A mother imagines
her reactions to a
nuclear attack warning





Stephanie Bowgett

worked as a teacher ; her husband David is also a teacher, and they have one daughter, Kate, aged five.

Stephanie has been a member of the Chester Women for Peace Group since its formation, and she is a member of the Labour Party. She writes :

THE DAY THE WAR BEGINS is my imagined reaction to a sudden nuclear attack. I decided to take the afternoon when I wrote it as the afternoon. I accepted conditions that day as likely, so lucky coincidences - some shopping still in a bag, and buckets of water in the garden - are actually true to life.

My little girl is five, and I have only the one. I would hate to imagine the scenario if I'd had three at different schools, or non toilet-trained toddlers, or a handicapped person at home.

S.B.

Chester, July 1982

The illustrations and large-type printing are excerpts from the official government booklet ' PROTECT AND SURVIVE '

THE ATTACK WARNING

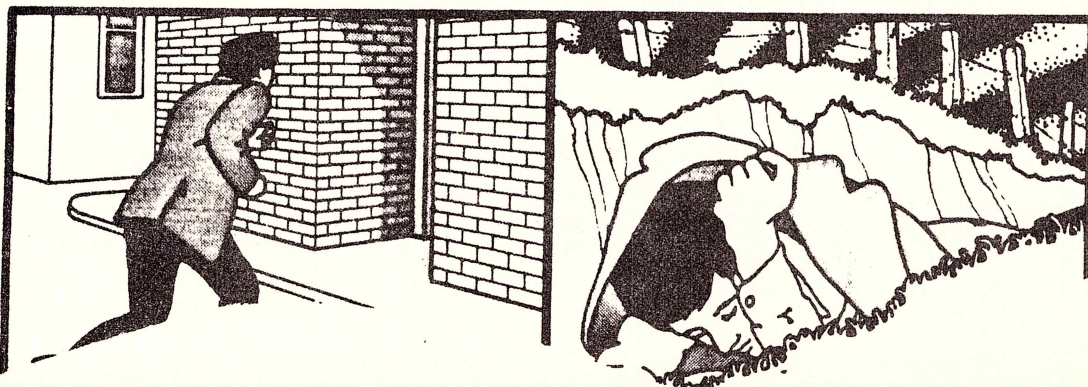
When an air attack is expected the sirens will sound a rising and falling note.

The warning will also be broadcast on the radio.

A plummy lady goat-keeper on "Woman's Hour" assures me that goats have a 'marvellous' smell if they're well cared for and outside the rain dribbles down the windows relentlessly. I search the ironing basket for the least gruesome article. I've reached the cast-iron denims and intricately pintucked cotton garments that form the silt that always gets left till next time. A sudden unearthly wail sounds outside, it fills the air rising and falling ... It sounds for all the world like a siren but... "We interrupt this broadcast to warn listeners of an imminent nuclear attack. The first bombs could reach this country in as little as nine minutes. There are some simple precautions ..."

The soothing "Blue Peter" voice issues instructions as if we were all making accessories for our Action Man or origami hippopotami. I still stand, iron in hand, totally disbelieving, letting precious seconds pass. Nine minutes, the siren's insistent wail penetrates my trance; nine minutes, that's long enough to get Kate, if I run. At least we two could be together. I fly out of the front door and up the street. At the corner I'm suddenly indecisive - should I be concentrating on building my shelter and collecting food and water? If we're not hit directly, I should have some time before fall-out descends. I could get Kate then, perhaps David can get to us. Why I say this to myself, I don't know. It will be impossible for him to get from Shotton with no car and I expect the roads will be blocked. Anyway, he's responsible for a class of children. I find that I'm automatically running on towards the school. Rain has plastered my hair over my eyes and my skirt is clinging wetly around my legs making running difficult. My slip-on sandals are slippery and I keep falling off them, slowing me down. I kick them off and run on barefoot. Immediately I step on something sharp and start to cry - I don't think it's because of the pain. I'm at the school gates now with other single-minded bedraggled parents, running in silence across the school field. If only the siren would stop, I think I could bear anything.

... immediately ...
 ...ing nearby and you cannot reach one within a couple of minutes, use any kind of cover, or lie flat (in a ditch) and cover the exposed skin of the head and hands.

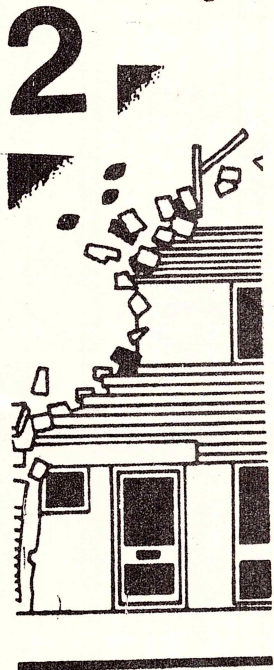


In Kate's classroom the children sit in their coats with their teacher who is telling them a story to which they listen politely. There is an atmosphere of deliberate hysterical calm. I grab Kate from the group and drag her out into the rain.

"Why are we ..?" "Shut up", I snap. "Please, Kate, just for once, do what you're told without asking silly questions. Now, nun."

Kate tries to run on her still baby-chubby legs, trying to stifle her sobs. Why did I have to take it out on her, it might be the last thing I say to her.

The streets are packed now, everyone is trying to reach someone, somewhere else. It seems everyone's instinct rebels against curling up alone in a corner to die. Old people stand in their doorways, their terrified faces remembering the last time the sirens sounded; they are confused. An old man grabs my elbow and starts to ask me something, I pat his hand but run on without speaking to him. God, is this what I'm really like? The shops are jam-packed, as I pass the corner shop I see people standing on the counters throwing down boxes, grabbing tins, packets. The owner is standing sobbing in the middle. I don't help her and I hate myself as I drag Kate through the puddles and through my open front door.



2 What to do on hearing an Attack Warning:

At home

If you are at home you should:

Send the children to the fall-out room.

Turn off the gas and electricity at the mains.

lights. Turn off oil supplies.

Close stoves, damp down fires.

Shut windows, draw curtains.

Go to the fall-out room.

Ludicrously incongruous, the calm, optimistic voice on the radio carries on with its litany of soothing instructions. "Don't forget to take this radio and spare batteries with you into your inner refuge. The Government will keep you in touch with events and issue further instructions.. The first bomb could hit Britain in as little as four minutes. There are still some things which you can ..."

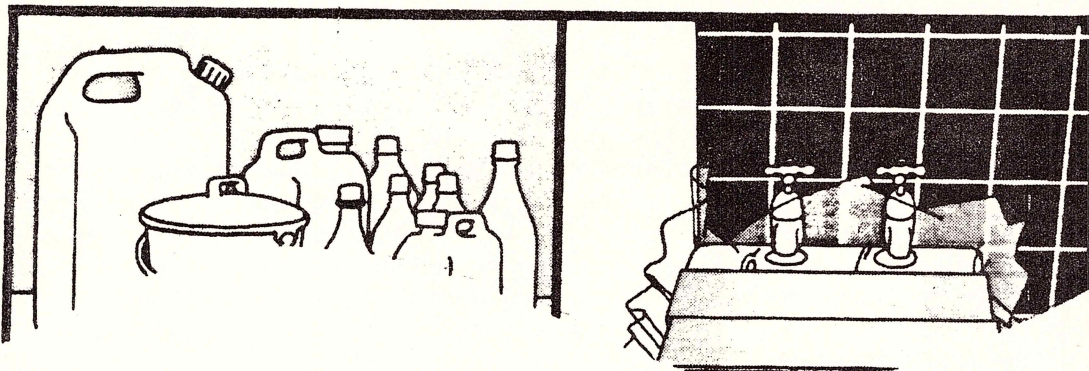
I must make some sort of radiation shelter. "Protect and Survive". I must be one of the few people who have actually studied it and my mind's a blank. I heave the dining room table over to the most suitable corner - I'd thought this out before-and push the chair and settee on either side of it. They're foam-filled and inflammable, but I've nothing else. My lungs feel as though they will burst, my hands and feet are wet and freezing cold and my fingers are clumsy. Kate is also dripping, horribly wide-eyed and silent. I push her under the table with some cushions and tell her not to move. I don't think she could.

so provide

ing bottles for use in the fall-out room in the bath, in basins and in other containers.

Seal or cover all you can. Anything that has fall-out dust on it will be contaminated and dangerous to drink or to eat.

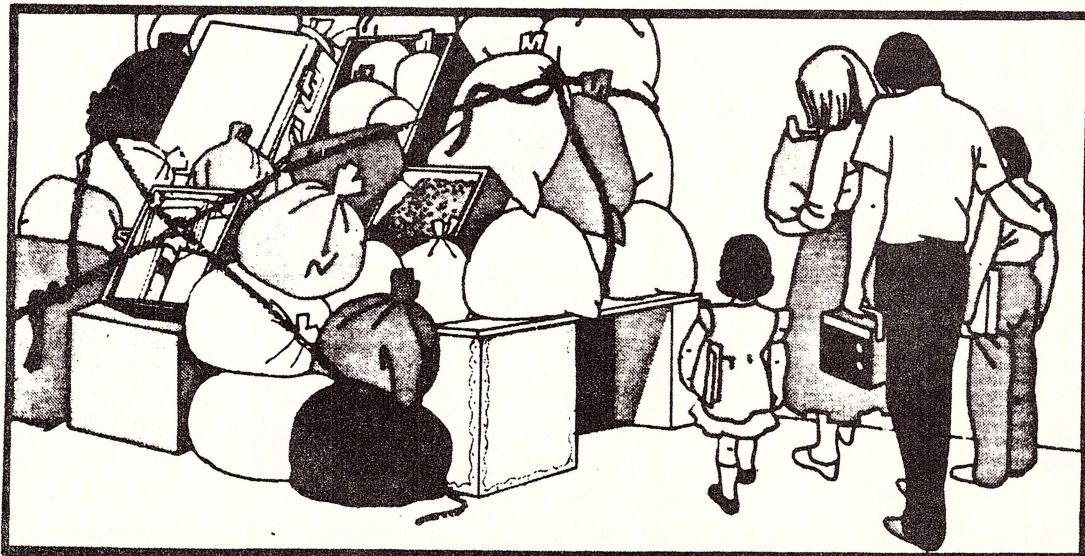
You cannot remove radiation from water by boiling it.



Water. We need two gallons, don't we? Or is it two gallons a day, I can't remember. I run into the garden to get the buckets and find them already brimming with rain-water, probably some less palatable morsels as well, but I'm relieved, anyway. I heave them in one at a time and stash them under the table with a bark at Kate not to touch it. She has her hands over her ears to keep out the wail of the sirens and is rocking miserably. She sees my face and starts to sob again. I can't comfort her now.

I run into the kitchen and turn on the tap to fill up the washing-up bowl. My shopping bag stand unpacked by the door where I dropped it with relief after struggling home from Tesco's. Thank God, I'm not tidy and methodical. There's a bit of space at the top, so I empty a shelf of tins into it. I tend to hoard, but not nourishing things like beans and spaghetti; we've got beansprouts, consomme, fruit juice and ratatouille, tuna fish and a highly suspect ancient tin of condensed milk. I drag the bag through and tip it under the table. The space is getting full.

At home



All at home must go to the fall-out room and stay inside the inner refuge, keeping the radio tuned for Government advice and instructions.

"There is now probably less than one minute. We cannot predict exactly when or where the first bomb will fall, but we advise you to take this radio into your inner refuge now or take cover as best you can."

action check list

Have you sent

Have you turned

Have you shut
curtains?

Have you turned
mains?

Have you closed

Have you filled
water, and

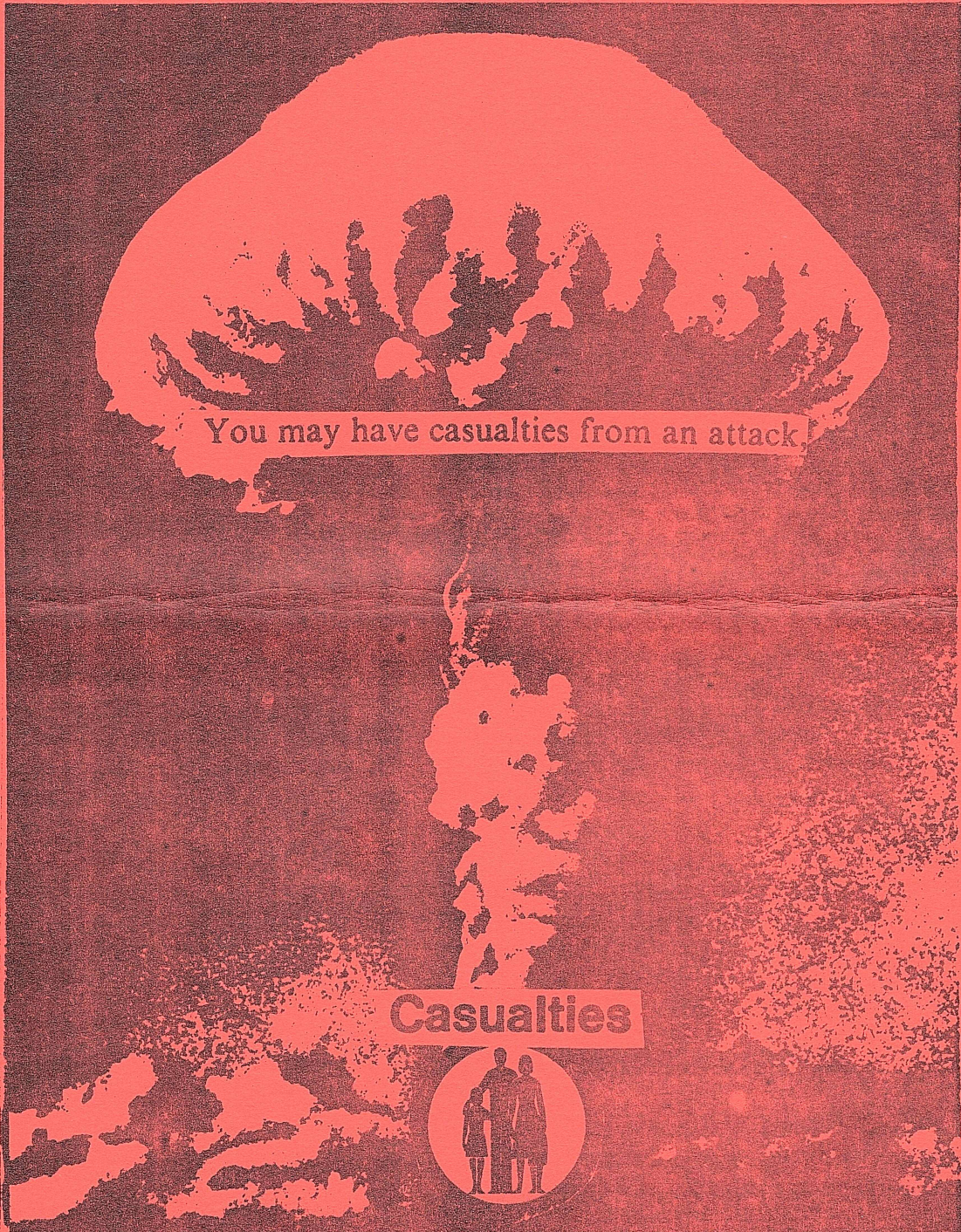
I run back into the kitchen and slip on the floor, jarring my arm so painfully that I feel momentarily sick. I had forgotten the tap. I paddle over to the sink and turn off the water. The table is on the other side of the kitchen hatch, so I reach through and stand the bowl on top of the shelter, ridiculously wincing as the water slops onto the polished surface. I grab boxes of cereal, dried fruits, nuts, cooking chocolate, glace cherries, coconut and rice and throw them through the hatch. I open the fridge and pile everything into the salad drawer and add a random selection from the freezer for good measure. I push this through onto the table, slopping more water from the bowl.

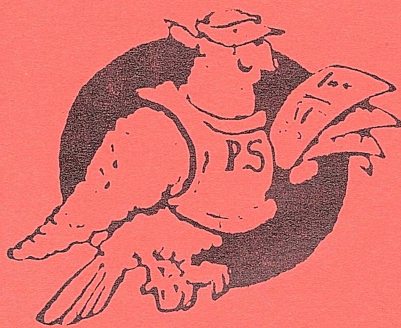
Action

23. Without stopping, I tear upstairs and into Kate's room. I grab her duvet and her beloved sleepy bear and throw them down the stair-well. In our room I pull our duvet and pillows off the bed. Our room - David. If only the siren would stop. Clothes, we need clothes. I tip my jumpers and underwear onto the duvet and run to get a random armful of Kate's. I clamber down the stair, pulling bedding and clothing with me and push it into the lounge. I go back for sleepy bear and throw him to Kate, who instantly clings to him. Pulling duvets and clothes behind me, I crawl under the table, on top of a pile of tins. The radio now emits a crackling sound and the sirens howl. I've no idea how long I've taken. I'm soaking wet, shivering with cold, exhaustion and fright.
24. My arm throbs and my foot is bleeding. I've forgotten so much - we haven't got a toilet bucket, a tin opener, first aid kit,
25. "Where's Daddy, Mummy, is he at a rehearsal?"
26. "...toys, cleaning things, dustbin sacks, I haven't any in the house, the electricity is still on ..."
27. "Where's Daddy, Mummy?"
28. "Daddy's at school, love, with his children. He'll have to stay and look after them." I am suddenly certain that we won't see him again. I could phone - I'm being ridiculous. I won't see my parents again, my friends, anybody, anything. I want to be with David.
29. "Wait a minute, love, I'll be straight back."
- Once more, I stumble up the stairs and grab the photo albums from Kate's bedroom shelf. I know I'm being stupid, but it's all I've got of David, all I've got of me as I know me. I shudder as I remember pushing away the frightened old man, the weeping lady in the shop who I didn't help. What will I turn into? I go into the bathroom, spread the bath towel on the floor and throw the contents of the bathroom cabinet, cleaning things, soap, shampoo and the photos onto it. I make a bundle of it and pick up a bucket with cleaning things in my other hand. I stagger down and deposit these outside our "refuge". I run into the kitchen and collect tin opener and knives from the magnetic rack and two mugs from the draining-board.

This time, when I drop beside Kate I know I cannot move again. We must organise our space. The searing note of the siren rises and falls, rises and falls. Kate presses her hands over her ears and shakes her head. I recite like a litany a list of the things I haven't got. "Torch, plastic bags, writing materials, candles, matches, stove, toilet rolls, David ..."

We wait.





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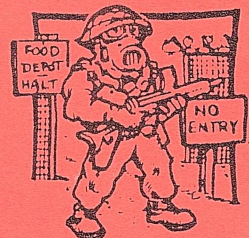
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PEACE SEARCH is a small independent group of parents wishing to create awareness of the need for disarmament.