CONTENTS

MIRACLE IN MANHATTAN
By Bill Peters........................................ 6

BREAKFAST AT TWILIGHT
By Philip K. Dick.................................... 25

COMMAND PERFORMANCE
By Robert K. White................................. 42

THE SQUIRRELS
By Gerry Greenstreet.............................. 56

PI IN THE SKY
By Philip Weck...................................... 64

COMPLETE NOVEL

POISON PLANET
By Sam Merwin, Jr.................................. 70

Cover: CLARENCE DOORE

Copyright 1954 by the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company. All rights reserved.
BREAKFAST AT TWILIGHT

BY PHILIP K. DICK

It's distinctly ungood to wake up in the middle of a war. Anybody knows that. But what bothered the McLeans most was the fact that the war they were in wouldn't begin for another hundred years!

"DAD?" Earl asked, hurrying out of the bathroom, "you going to drive us to school today?"

Tim McLean poured himself a second cup of coffee. "You kids can walk for a change. The car's in the garage."

Judy pouted. "It's raining."

"No it isn't," Virginia corrected her sister. She drew the shade back. "It's all foggy, but it isn't raining."

"Let me look." Mary McLean dried her hands and came over from the sink. "What an odd day. Is that fog? It looks more like smoke. I can't make out a thing. What did the weather man say?"

"I couldn't get anything on the radio," Earl said. "Nothing but static."

Tim stirred angrily. "That darn thing on the blink again? Seems like I just had it fixed." He got up and moved sleepily over to the radio. He fiddled idly with the dials. The three children hurried back and forth, getting ready for school. "Strange," Tim said.

"I'm going." Earl opened the front door.

"Wait for your sisters," Mary ordered absently.

"I'm ready," Virginia said. "Do I look all right?"

"You look fine," Mary said, kissing her.

"I'll call the radio repair place from the office," Tim said.

He broke off. Earl stood at the kitchen door, pale and silent, his eyes wide with terror.

"What is it?"
“I—I came back.”
“What is it?” Are you sick?”
“I can’t go to school.”
They stared at him. “What is wrong?” Tim grabbed his son’s arm. “Why can’t you go to school?”
“They—they won’t let me.”
“Who?”
“The soldiers.”
It came tumbling out with a rush. “They’re all over. Soldiers and guns. And they’re coming here.”
“Coming? Coming here?” Tim echoed, dazed.
“They’re coming here and they’re going to”—Earl broke off, terrified. From the front porch came the sound of heavy boots. A crash. Splintering wood. Voices.

“Good Lord,” Mary gasped. “What is it, Tim?”
Tim entered the living room, his heart laboring painfully. Three men stood inside the door. Men in gray-green uniforms, weighted with guns and complex tangles of equipment. Tubes and hoses. Meters on thick cords. Boxes and leather straps and antennae. Elaborate masks locked over
their heads. Behind the masks Tim saw tired, whisker-stubbled faces, red-rimmed eyes that gazed at him in brutal displeasure.

One of the soldiers jerked up his gun, aiming at McLean's middle. Tim peered at it dumbly. The gun. Long and thin. Like a needle. Attached to a coil of tubes.

"What in the name of—" he began, but the soldier cut him savagely off.

"Who are you?" His voice was harsh, guttural. "What are you doing here?" He pushed his mask aside. His skin was dirty. Cuts and pocks lined his sallow flesh. His teeth were broken and missing.

"Answer!" a second soldier demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"Show your blue card," the third said. "Let's see your Sector number." His eyes strayed to the children and Mary standing mutely at the dining room door. His mouth fell open.

"A woman!"

The three soldiers gazed in disbelief.

"What the hell is this?" the first demanded. "How long has this woman been here?"

Tim found his voice. "She's my wife. What is this? What—"

"Your wife?" They were incredulous.

"My wife and children. For God's sake—"

"Your wife? And you'd bring her here? You must be out of your head!"

"He's got ash sickness," one said. He lowered his gun and strode across the living room to Mary. "Come on, sister. You're coming with us."

Tim lunged.

A wall of force hit him. He sprawled, clouds of darkness rolling around him. His ears sang. His head throbbed. Everything receded. Dimly, he was aware of shapes moving. Voices. The room. He concentrated.

The soldiers were herding the children back. One of them grabbed Mary by the arm. He tore her dress away, ripping it from her shoulders. "Gee," he snarled. "He'd bring her here, and she's not even stung!"

"Take her along."

"Okay, Captain." The soldier dragged Mary toward the front door. "We'll do what we can with her."

"The kids." The captain waved the other soldier over with the children. "Take them along. I don't get it. No masks. No cards. How'd this house miss getting hit? Last
night was the worst in months!"

Tim struggled painfully to his feet. His mouth was bleeding. His vision blurred. He hung on tight to the wall. "Look," he muttered. "For God's sake—"

The captain was staring into the kitchen. "Is that—is that food?" He advanced slowly through the dining room. "Look!"

The other soldiers came after him, Mary and the children forgotten. They stood around the table, amazed.

"Look at it!"

"Coffee." One grabbed up the pot and drank it greedily down. He choked, black coffee dripping down his tunic. "Hot. Jeeze. Hot coffee."


The captain disappeared into the pantry. He came out, lugging a case of canned peas. "Get the rest. Get it all. We'll load it in the snake."

He dropped the case on the table with a crash. Watching Tim intently, he fumbled in his dirty tunic until he found a cigarette. He lit it slowly, not taking his eyes from Tim. "All right," he said. "Let's hear what you have to say."

Tim's mouth opened and closed. No words came. His mind was blank. Dead. He couldn't think.

"This food. Where'd you get it? And these things." The captain waved around the kitchen. "Dishes. Furniture. How come this house hasn't been hit? How did you survive last night's attack?"

"I—" Tim gasped.

The captain came toward him ominously. "The woman. And the kids. All of you. What are you doing here?" His voice was hard. "You better be able to explain, mister. You better be able to explain what you're doing here—or we'll have to burn the whole damn lot of you."

Tim sat down at the table. He took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to focus his mind. His body ached. He rubbed blood from his mouth, conscious of a broken molar and bits of loose tooth. He got out a handkerchief and spat the bits into it. His hands were shaking.

"Come on," the captain said.

Mary and the children slipped into the room. Judy was crying. Virginia's face was blank with shock. Earl stared wide-eyed at the soldiers, his face white.
“Tim,” Mary said, putting her hand on his arm. “Are you all right?”

Tim nodded. “I’m all right.”

Mary pulled her dress around her. “Tim, they can’t get away with it. Somebody’ll come. The mailman. The neighbors. They can’t just—”

“Shut up,” the captain snapped. His eyes flickered oddly. “The mailman? What are you talking about?” He held out his hand. “Let’s see your yellow slip, sister.”

“Yellow slip?” Mary faltered.

The captain rubbed his jaw. “No yellow slip. No masks. No cards.”

“They’re geeps,” a soldier said.

“Maybe. And maybe not.”

“They’re geeps, Captain. We better burn ’em. We can’t take any chances.”

“There’s something funny going on here,” the captain said. He plucked at his neck, lifting up a small box on a cord. “I’m getting a polic here.”

“A polic?” A shiver moved through the soldiers. “Wait, Captain. We can handle this. Don’t get a polic. He’ll put us on 4 and then we’ll never—”

The captain spoke into the box. “Give me Web B.”

Tim looked up at Mary. “Listen, honey. I—”

“Shut up.” A soldier prodded him. Tim lapsed into silence.

The box squawked. “Web B.”

“Can you spare a polic? We’ve run into something strange. Group of five. Man, woman, three kids. No masks, no cards, the woman not stung, dwelling completely intact. Furniture, fixtures, and about two hundred pounds of food.”

The box hesitated. “All right. Polic on his way. Stay there. Don’t let them escape.”

“I won’t.” The captain dropped the box back in his shirt. “A polic will be here any minute. Meanwhile, let’s get the food loaded.”

From outside came a deep thundering roar. It shook the house, rattling the dishes in the cupboard.

“Jeez,” a soldier said. “That was close.”

“I hope the screens hold until nightfall.” The captain grabbed up the case of canned peas. “Get the rest. We want it loaded before the polic comes.”

The two soldiers filled their arms and followed him through the house, out the front door. Their voices diminished as they strode down the path.
Tim got to his feet. “Stay here,” he said thickly.
“What are you doing?” Mary asked nervously.
“Maybe I can get out.” He ran to the back door and unlatched it, hands shaking. He pulled the door wide and stepped out on the back porch. “I don’t see any of them. If we can only . . .”
He stopped.
Around him gray clouds blew. Gray ash, billowing as far as he could see. Dim shapes were visible. Broken shapes, silent and unmoving in the grayness.
Ruins.
Ruined buildings. Heaps of rubble. Debris everywhere. He walked slowly down the back steps. The concrete walk ended abruptly. Beyond it, slag and heaps of rubble were strewn. Nothing else. Nothing as far as the eye could see.
Nothing stirred. Nothing moved. In the gray silence there was no life. No motion. Only the clouds of drifting ash. The slag and the endless heaps.
The city was gone. The buildings were destroyed. Nothing remained. No people. No life. Jagged walls, empty and gaping. A few dark weeds growing among the debris. Tim bent down, touch-
ing a weed. Rough, thick stalk. And the slag. It was metal slag. Melted metal. He straightened up—
“Come back inside,” a crisp voice said.
He turned numbly. A man stood on the porch behind him, hands on his hips. A small man, hollow-cheeked. Eyes small and bright, like two black coals. He wore a uniform different from the soldiers’. His mask was pushed back, away from his face. His skin was yellow, faintly luminous, clinging to his cheek bones. A sick face, ravaged by fever and fatigue.
“Who are you?” Tim said.
“You’re—you’re the polic,” Tim said.
“That’s right. Now come inside. I expect to hear some answers from you. I have quite a few questions.”

“The first thing I want to know,” Commissioner Douglas said, “is how this house escaped destruction.”
Tim and Mary and the children sat together on the couch, silent and unmoving, faces blank with shock.
“Well?” Douglas demanded.
Tim found his voice. “Look,” he said. “I don’t
know. I don’t know anything. We woke up this morning like every other morning. We dressed and ate breakfast—"

“It was foggy out,” Virginia said. “We looked out and saw the fog.”

“And the radio wouldn’t work,” Earl said.

“The radio?” Douglas’ thin face twisted. “There haven’t been any audio signals in months. Except for government purposes. This house. All of you. I don’t understand. If you were geeps—"

“Geeps. What does that mean?” Mary murmured.

“Soviet general-purpose troops.”

“Then the war has begun.”

“North America was attacked two years ago,” Douglas said. “In 1958.”

Tim sagged. “1958. Then this is 1960.” He reached suddenly into his pocket. He pulled out his wallet and tossed it to Douglas. “Look in there.”

Douglas opened the wallet suspiciously. “Why?”

“The library card. The parcel receipts. Look at the dates.” Tim turned to Mary. “I’m beginning to understand now. I had an idea when I saw the ruins.”

“Are we winning?” Earl piped.

Douglas studied Tim’s wal-
spot, McLean. You should have gone farther on."

"I didn’t pick it. It just happened."

"You must have done something."

Tim shook his head. "No. Nothing. We got up. And we were—here."

Douglas was deep in thought. "Here. Seven years in the future. Moved forward through time. We know nothing about time travel. No work has been done with it. There seem to be no evident military possibilities."

"How did the war begin?" Mary asked faintly.

"Begin? It didn’t begin. You remember. There was war seven years ago."

"The real war. This."

"There wasn’t any point when it became—this. We fought in Korea. We fought in China. In Germany and Yugoslavia and Iran. It spread, farther and farther. Finally the bombs were falling here. It came like the plague. The war grew. It didn’t begin." Abruptly he put his notebook away. "A report on you would be suspect. They might think I had the ash sickness."

"What’s that?" Virginia asked.

"Radio-active particles in the air. Carried to the brain. Causes insanity. Everybody has a touch of it, even with the masks."

"I’d sure like to know who’s winning," Earl repeated. "What was that outside? That truck. Was it rocket propelled?"


"Seven years," Mary said. "So much has changed. It doesn’t seem possible."

"So much?" Douglas shrugged. "I suppose so. I remember what I was doing seven years ago. I was still in school. Learning. I had an apartment and a car. I went out dancing. I bought a TV set. But these things were there. The twilight. This. Only I didn’t know. None of us knew. But they were there."

"You’re a Political Commissioner?" Tim asked.

"I supervise the troops. Watch for political deviation. In a total war we have to keep people under constant surveillance. One Commie down in the Webs could wreck the whole business. We can’t take chances."

Tim nodded. "Yes. It was there. The twilight. Only we didn’t understand it."

Douglas examined the books in the bookcase. "I’ll
take a couple of these along. I haven’t seen fiction in months. Most of it disappeared. Burned back in ’57.”

“Burned?”

Douglas helped himself. “Shakespeare. Milton. Dryden. I’ll take the old stuff. It’s safer. None of the Steinbeck and Dos Passos. Even a police can get in trouble. If you stay here, you better get rid of that.” He tapped a volume of Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov.*

“If we stay! What else can we do?”

“You want to stay?”

“No,” Mary said quietly.

Douglas shot her a quick glance. “No, I suppose not. If you stay you’ll be separated, of course. Children to the Canadian Relocation Centers. Women are situated down in the undersurface factory-labor camps. Men are automatically a part of Military.”

“Like those three who left,” Tim said.

“Unless you can qualify for the id block.”

“What’s that?”

“Industrial designing and Technology. What training have you had? Anything along scientific lines?”

“No. Accounting.”

Douglas shrugged. “Well, you’ll be given a standard test. If your IQ is high enough you could go in the Political Service. We use a lot of men.” He paused thoughtfully, his arms loaded with books. “You better go back, McLean. You’ll have trouble getting accustomed to this. I’d go back, if I could. But I can’t.”

“Back?” Mary echoed.

“How?”

“The way you came.”

“We just—came.”

Douglas halted at the front door. “Last night was the worst rom attack so far. They hit this whole area.”

“Rom?”

“Robot operated missiles. The Soviets are systematically destroying continental America, mile by mile. Roms are cheap. They make them by the million and fire them off. The whole process is automatic. Robot factories turn them out and fire them at us. Last night they came over here—waves of them. This morning the patrol came in and found nothing. Except you, of course.”

Tim nodded slowly. “I’m beginning to see.”

“The concentrated energy must have tipped some unstable time-fault. Like a rock fault. We’re always starting earthquakes. But a *time quake* . . . Interesting. That’s
what happened, I think. The release of energy, the destruction of matter, sucked your house into the future. Carried the house seven years ahead. This street, everything here, this very spot, was pulverized. Your house, seven years back, was caught in the undertow. The blast must have lashed back through time."

"Sucked into the future," Tim said. "During the night. While we were asleep."

Douglas watched him carefully. "Tonight," he said, "there will be another rom attack. It should finish off what is left." He looked at his watch. "It is now four in the afternoon. The attack will begin in a few hours. You should be undersurface. Nothing will survive up here. I can take you down with me, if you want. But if you want to take a chance, if you want to stay here—"

"You think it might tip us back?"

"Maybe. I don't know. It's a gamble. It might tip you back to your own time, or it might not. If not—"

"If not we wouldn't have a chance of survival."

Douglas flicked out a pocket map and spread it open on the couch. "A patrol will remain in this area another half hour. If you decide to come undersurface with us, go down this street this way." He traced a line on the map. "To this open field here. The patrol is a Political unit. They'll take you the rest of the way down. You think you can find the field?"

"I think so," Tim said, looking at the map. His lips twisted. "That open field used to be the grammar school my kids went to. That's where they were going when the troops stopped them. Just a little while ago."

"Seven years ago," Douglas corrected. He snapped the map shut and restored it to his pocket. He pulled his mask down and moved out the front door onto the porch. "Maybe I'll see you again. Maybe not. It's your decision. You'll have to decide one way or the other. In any case—good luck."

He turned and walked briskly away from the house.

"Dad?" Earl shouted, "are you going in the Army? Are you going to wear a mask and shoot one of those guns?" His eyes sparkled with excitement. "Are you going to drive a snake?"

Tim McLean squatted down and pulled his son to
him. "You want that? You want to stay here? If I'm going to wear a mask and shoot one of those guns we can't go back."

Earl looked doubtful. "Couldn't we go back later?"

Tim shook his head. "Afraid not. We've got to decide now, whether we're going back or not."

"You heard Mr. Douglas," Virginia said disgustedly. "The attack's going to start in a couple of hours."

Tim got to his feet and paced back and forth. "If we stay in the house we'll get blown to bits. Let's face it. There's only a faint chance we'll be tipped back to our own time. A slim possibility—a long shot. Do we want to stay here with roms falling all around us, knowing any second it may be the end—hearing them come closer, hitting nearer—lying on the floor, waiting, listening—"

"Do you really want to go back?" Mary demanded.

"Of course, but the risk—"

"I'm not asking you about the risk. I'm asking you if you really want to go back. Maybe you want to stay here. Maybe Earl's right. You in a uniform and a mask, with one of those needle guns. Driving a snake."

"With you in a factory-la-

bor camp! And the kids in a Government Relocation Center! How do you think that would be? What do you think they'd teach them? What do you think they'd grow up like? And believe . . . ."

"They'd probably teach them to be very useful."

"Useful! To what? To themselves? To mankind? Or to the war effort . . . ."

"They'd be alive," Mary said. "They'd be safe. This way, if we stay in the house, wait for the attack to come—"

"Sure," Tim grunted. "They would be alive. Probably quite healthy. Well, fed. Well-clothed and cared for." He looked down at his children, his face hard. "They'd stay alive, all right. They'd live to grow up and become adults. But what kind of adults? You heard what he said! Book burnings in '57. What'll they be taught from? What kind of ideas are left, since '57? What kind of beliefs can they get from a Government Relocation Center? What kind of values will they have?"

"There's the id block," Mary suggested.

"Industrial designing and Technocracy. For the bright ones. The clever ones with imagination. Busy slide-
rules and pencils. Drawing and planning and making discoveries. The girls could go into that. They could design the guns. Earl could go into the Political Service. He could make sure the guns were used. If any of the troops deviated, didn't want to shoot, Earl could report them and have them hauled off for reeducation. To have their political faith strengthened—in a world where those with brains design weapons and those without brains fire them."

"But they'd be alive," Mary repeated.

"You've got a strange idea of what being alive is! You call that alive? Maybe it is." Tim shook his head wearily. "Maybe you're right. Maybe we should go undersurface with Douglas. Stay in this world. Stay alive."

"I didn't say that," Mary said softly. "Tim, I had to find out if you really understood why it's worth it. Worth staying in the house, taking the chance we won't be tipped back."

"Then you want to take the chance?"

"Of course! We have to. We can't turn our children over to them—to the Relocation Center. To be taught how to hate and kill and destroy." Mary smiled up wanly. "Anyhow, they've always gone to the Jefferson School. And here, in this world, it's only an open field."

"Are we going back?" Judy piped. She caught hold of Tim's sleeve imploringly. "Are we going back now?"

Tim disengaged her arm. "Very soon, honey."

Mary opened the supply cupboards and rooted in them. "Everything's here. What did they take?"

"The case of canned peas. Everything we had in the refrigerator. And they smashed the front door."

"I'll bet we're beating them!" Earl shouted. He ran to the window and peered out. The sight of the rolling ash disappointed him. "I can't see anything! Just the fog!" He turned questioningly to Tim. "Is it always like this, here?"

"Yes," Tim answered.

Earl's face fell. "Just fog? Nothing else? Doesn't the sun shine ever?"

"I'll fix some coffee," Mary said.

"Good." Tim went into the bathroom and examined himself in the mirror. His mouth was cut, caked with dried blood. His head ached. He felt sick at his stomach.
“It doesn’t seem possible,” Mary said, as they sat down at the kitchen table.

Tim sipped his coffee. “No. It doesn’t.” Where he sat he could see out the window. The clouds of ash. The dim, jagged outline of ruined buildings.

“Is the man coming back?” Judy piped. “He was all thin and funny-looking. He isn’t coming back, is he?”

Tim looked at his watch. It read ten o’clock. He reset it, moving the hands to four-fifteen. “Douglas said it would begin at night-fall. That won’t be long.”

“Then we’re really staying in the house,” Mary said. “That’s right.”

“Even though there’s only a little chance?”

“Even though there’s only a little chance we’ll get back. Are you glad?”

“I’m glad,” Mary said, her eyes bright. “It’s worth it, Tim. You know it is. Anything’s worth it, any chance. To get back. And something else. We’ll all be here together... We can’t be—broken up. Separated.”

Tim poured himself more coffee. “We might as well make ourselves comfortable. We have maybe three hours to wait. We might as well try to enjoy them.”

At six-thirty the first rum fell. They felt the shock, a deep rolling wave of force that lapped over the house.

Judy came running from the dining room, face white with fear. “Daddy! What is it?”

“Nothing. Don’t worry.”

“Come on back,” Virginia called impatiently. “It’s your turn.” They were playing Monopoly.

Earl leaped to his feet. “I want to see.” He ran excitedly to the window. “I can see where it hit!”

Tim lifted the shade and looked out. Far off, in the distance, a white glare burned fitfully. A towering column of luminous smoke rose from it.

A second shudder vibrated through the house. A dish crashed from the shelf, into the sink.

It was almost dark outside. Except for the two spots of white Tim could make out nothing. The clouds of ash were lost in the gloom. The ash and the ragged remains of buildings.

“That was closer,” Mary said.

A third rom fell. In the living room the windows burst, showering glass across the rug.
"We better get back," Tim said.

"Where?"

"Down in the basement. Come on." Tim unlocked the basement door and they trooped nervously downstairs.

"Food," Mary said. "We better bring the food that's left."

"Good idea. You kids go on down. We'll come along in a minute."

"I can carry something," Earl said.

"Go on down." The fourth room hit, farther off than the last. "And stay away from the window."

"I'll move something over the window," Earl said. "The big piece of plywood we used for my train."

"Good idea." Tim and Mary returned to the kitchen.

"Food. Dishes. What else?"


A shattering roar drowned out her words. The kitchen window gave, showering glass over them. The dishes over the sink tumbled down in a torrent of breaking china. Tim grabbed Mary and pulled her down.

From the broken window rolling clouds of ominous gray drifted into the room. The evening air stank, a sour, rotten smell. Tim shuddered.

"Forget the food. Let's get back down."

"But—"

"Forget it." He grabbed her and pulled her down the basement stairs. They tumbled in a heap, Tim slamming the door after them.

"Where's the food?" Virginia demanded.

Tim wiped his forehead shakily. "Forget it. We won't need it."

"Help me," Earl gasped. Tim helped him move the sheet of plywood over the window above the laundry tubs. The basement was cold and silent. The cement floor under them was faintly moist.

Two rooms struck at once. Tim was hurled to the floor. The concrete hit him and he grunted. For a moment blackness swirled around him. Then he was on his knees, groping his way up.

"Everybody all right?" he muttered.

"I'm all right," Mary said. Judy began to whimper. Earl was feeling his way across the room.

"I'm all right," Virginia said. "I guess."
The lights flickered and dimmed. Abruptly they went out. The basement was pitch black.

"Well," Tim said. "There they go."

"I have my flashlight." Earl winked the flashlight on. "How's that?"

"Fine," Tim said.

More roms hit. The ground leaped under them, bucking and heaving. A wave of force shuddering the whole house.

"We better lie down," Mary said.

"Yes. Lie down." Tim stretched himself out awkwardly. A few bits of plaster rained down around them.

"When will it stop?" Earl asked uneasily.

"Soon," Tim said.

"Then we'll be back?"

"Yes. We’ll be back."

The next blast hit them almost at once. Tim felt the concrete rise under him. It grew, swelling higher and higher. He was going up. He shut his eyes, holding on tight. Higher and higher he went, carried up by the ballooning concrete. Around him beams and timbers cracked. Plaster poured down. He could hear glass breaking. And a long way off, the licking crackles of fire.

"Tim," Mary’s voice came faintly.

"Yes."

"We’re not going to—to make it."

"I don’t know."

"We’re not. I can tell."

"Maybe not." He grunted in pain as a board struck his back, settling over him. Boards and plaster, covering him, burying him. He could smell the sour smell, the night air and ash. It drifted and rolled into the cellar, through the broken window.

"Daddy," Judy's voice came faintly.

"What?"

"Aren't we going back?"

He opened his mouth to answer. A shattering roar cut his words off. He jerked, tossed by the blast. Everything was moving around him. A vast wind tugged at him, a hot wind, licking at him, gnawing at him. He held on tight. The wind pulled, dragging him with it. He cried out as it seared his hands and face.

"Mary—"

Then silence. Only blackness and silence.

Cars.

Cars were stopping nearby. Then voices. And the noise of footsteps. Tim stirred, pushing the boards
from him. He struggled to his feet.

"Mary." He looked around. "We're back."

The basement was in ruins. The walls were broken and sagging. Great gaping holes showed a green line of grass beyond. A concrete walk. The small rose garden. The white side of the stucco house next door.

Lines of telephone poles. Roofs. Houses. The city. As it had always been. Every morning.

"We're back!" Wild joy leaped through him. Back. Safe. It was over. Tim pushed quickly through the debris of his ruined house. "Mary, are you all right?"

"Here." Mary sat up, plaster dust raining from her. She was white all over, her hair, her skin, her clothing. Her face was cut and scratched. Her dress was torn. "Are we really back?"

"Mr. McLean! You all right?"

A blue-clad policeman leaped down into the cellar. Behind him two white-clad figures jumped. A group of neighbors collected outside, peering anxiously to see.

"I'm okay," Tim said. He helped Judy and Virginia up. "I think we're all okay."

"What happened?" The policeman pushed boards aside, coming over. "A bomb? Some kind of a bomb?"

"The house is a shambles," one of the white-clad interns said. "You sure nobody's hurt?"

"We were down here. In the basement."

"You all right, Tim?" Mrs. Hendricks called, stepping down gingerly into the cellar.

"What happened?" Frank Foley shouted. He leaped down with a crash. "God, Tim! What the hell were you doing?"

The two white-clad interns poked suspiciously around the ruins. "You're lucky, mister. Damn lucky. There's nothing left upstairs."

Foley came over beside Tim. "Damn it, man! I told you to have that hot water heater looked at!"

"What?" Tim muttered.

"The hot water heater! I told you there was something wrong with the cut-off. It must've kept heating up, not turned off..." Foley winked nervously. "But I won't say anything, Tim. The insurance. You can count on me."

Tim opened his mouth. But the words didn't come. What could he say? —No, it wasn't a defective hot water
heater that I forgot to have repaired. No, it wasn’t a faulty connection in the stove. It wasn’t any of those things. It wasn’t a leaky gas line, it wasn’t a plugged furnace, it wasn’t a pressure cooker we forgot to turn off.

It’s war. Total war. And not just war for me. For my family. For just my house.

It’s for your house, too. Your house and my house and all the houses. Here and in the next block, in the next town, the next state and country and continent. The whole world, like this. Shambles and ruins. Fog and dank weeds growing in the rusting slag. War for all of us. For everybody crowding down into the basement, white-faced, frightened, somehow sensing something terrible.

And when it really came, when the five years were up, there’d be no escape. No going back, tipping back into the past, away from it. When it came for them all, it would have them for eternity; there would be no one climbing back out, as he had.

Mary was watching him. The policeman, the neighbors, the white-clad interns—all of them were watching him. Waiting for him to explain. To tell them what it was.

“Was it the hot water heater?” Mrs. Hendricks asked timidly. “That was it, wasn’t it, Tim? Things like that do happen. You can’t be sure . . .”

“Maybe it was home brew,” a neighbor suggested, in a feeble attempt at humor. “Was that it?”

He couldn’t tell them. They wouldn’t understand, because they didn’t want to understand. They didn’t want to know. They needed reassurance. He could see it in their eyes. Pitiful, pathetic fear. They sensed something terrible—and they were afraid. They were searching his face, seeking his help. Words of comfort. Words to banish their fear.

“Yeah,” Tim said heavily. “It was the hot water heater.”


“I should have got it fixed,” Tim went on. “I should have had it looked at a long time ago. Before it got in such bad shape.” Tim looked around at the circle of anxious people, hanging on his words. “I should have had it looked at. Before it was too late.”

THE END