1962: The End of the World

Around the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis the BBC broadcast a new play set at the time. The protagonists took very seriously the idea that the world was probably about to come to an end. The hero used it to excuse his extravagance, and the heroine was deeply disturbed at being separated from her husband and children – they were back in America, and staying always close to their fall-out shelter. Is that how it was? In the absence of letters or diaries, without any striking moment to fix things in my mind, without any continuity of thought and action linking now with then, it is impossible to say what I really thought, saw and felt during Cuban missile crisis. Did I believe that war was imminent? Did I see people behaving in an unusual way? Was I afraid? This note will try to tease out an answer.

Canon Collins of CND began his letter to the Times[1] at the height of the crisis: 'Assuming we are all alive next week ...' He went on to make sensible points about the causes of instability in the world, but I am interested for now in that opening line. Most people in the public eye, I suspect, felt obliged to avoid anything that might have encouraged panic during the crisis, as a group of Sheffield students found when they were disciplined by the University for a rag-week stunt involving a mock newspaper with a headline announcing the outbreak of war. Collins was therefore making a dramatic point, taking a stand against complacency, perhaps, refusing to limit himself to vague phrases about a serious and dangerous situation and a profound threat to peace, and facing instead the harsh possibility that few of us would be alive next week. From what I remember of his public personality, this sort of histrionics was fairly typical, at once his strength and his weakness: his strength, because it made him say things that people didn't want to hear (going back to his stand on war-time saturation bombing), and his weakness, because it sometimes made him seem self-satisfied and self-important. No doubt in the Whitehall and Grosvenor Square demonstrations many supporters of CND were proclaiming the imminent end of the world. Did they, did Canon Collins, did people generally, during that week that began with Kennedy's speech of 22 October, really expect nuclear war and annihilation?

People often assume nowadays, I think, that we must have stood quaking on the edge of the abyss. This is partly because we now have more information about what went on during the crisis, some of which makes it seem even scarier than it was at the time, but it is mainly because we are not the same as we were fifty years ago. In those days if a man in a decent suit stood up and spoke with received pronunciation about a grave crisis, a common reaction was to feel relief that the right people had everything in hand, and so everything would probably be all right. That is not how we respond nowadays. Also, to judge by our reactions to recent, lesser crises, we would now be indignant that our government was letting us in for this sort of thing, when they should have been looking after us, and this moral indignation would stir up any latent tendency to panic. I don't think the generation who lived through the war, and who were still in 1962 the predominant voice in public opinion, responded to events in quite that way.

But I can't hope to reach a conclusion about what people in general, or even the CND supporters amongst whom I lived, really expected and really felt, because I don't even know what those closest to me expected and felt. I don't know what I felt myself.

I was fifteen at the time and had just started my fifth year at Dulwich. I recently tried to test my recall of 1962 by going over in my mind which masters took us for each subject, and picturing the rooms where we had our different lessons. Getting all that clear was a start, but it is much harder to get an uncluttered view of myself. Being in the Classical Remove seemed like a definite step up in the school, like the beginning of serious work. The nicest thing people said about me was that I was a serious-minded boy; the worst that I was pompous, humourless and gullible. Underlying both characters was a high degree of self-absorption, self-doubt and self-consciousness. Until recently I believed that I was, in those days, unusually prone to these adolescent vices, but I suspect that in this, as in other things, I was less exceptional than I supposed.

Another thing to mention about myself at that time is that my father was in America, just beginning a year on the faculty of the City University of New York. It's hard to convey to a twenty-first century person quite how easily we all seemed to take this separation. So far as I was concerned he simply dropped out of our life. He was a conscientious rather than devoted father, who had always seemed fairly distant, often moody. He was often away from home or out late giving evening classes.[2]

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[1] 26 October 1962

Of course, just because I took his going away so easily doesn't mean my sisters did, and certainly doesn't mean it was easy for my mother. She was always busy, and I don't remember her complaining. But then I don't remember anything about her during his absence, and the fact that I saw no signs of unhappiness doesn't mean she wasn't unhappy. A year or so later, when my father was back in his old routine of staying away from home for two or three nights a week, I remember coming downstairs at about eleven o'clock in the evening and finding her lying curled up on the sofa with her little transistor radio, and I'm pretty sure she had been crying. I wouldn't have guessed, but for this moment, how keenly she felt his absences. Her wartime experience of being a mother on her own probably didn't make it much easier, but it had left her with a conviction that it was both useless and undignified to complain.

My older sisters, Jennifer and Imogen, had more insight, I am sure, into her state of mind, but neither then nor later did we speak about it, and now it is too late. The only glimpse I had of their participation in her feelings came a few months after our father left, when she was about to go over to join him in New York.[3] My sisters bought her for the occasion a short, diaphanous night-dress. I had no idea why they thought this important. At fifty-one years old my mother retained her good looks, but I don't think she had ever thought of herself as pretty and they had to coax her to accept the gift.

There is one further point about my background. My parents and Jennifer had all been members of CND since its formation in 1957, and I had been involved since 1959, when I went on my first Aldermaston march. I was therefore familiar with the grisly details of nuclear weapons, all the megatons and megadeaths. At school we once held a debate about unilateral disarmament and one of the arguments we used on our side involved showing a map of Britain with all the main bases marked, with circles to indicate the wide area roundabout that would be destroyed in the event of nuclear strikes. The master in charge criticised this as irrelevant to the debate, which I considered unfair; surely, I thought, one of the main reasons for getting rid of nuclear weapons was that they were so damned destructive. Once (perhaps more than once), early in my school career, when I handed in an exercise book with homework to be marked, I enclosed a leaflet containing a photograph of Hiroshima after 1945. I remember the master's curled lip as he gave it back to me.

So, being the boy I was then, and coming from that sort of background, what did I feel during the crisis? My friend Derek says that I talked about it at school, and he remembers me discussing it in class with Mr Howard, which surprised me, because I had forgotten that we had classes with Mr Howard that year. He was a kindly man, Mr Howard, and he will have known about my father, and he may have gone out of his way to reassure me. I have one, and only one, memory that is directly relevant. While we were going into school one morning we must have been discussing the news and I announced that my father was away from home, in America. I remember saying this in order to gain some kind of kudos, as having a special position vis-à-vis the drama, a seat in the front-stalls. When the end of the world came it would find my friends warmly in the bosom of their family, but we would be cruelly separated, my father and I. This doesn't necessarily mean that I had no genuine feelings of grief or anxiety (David Copperfield notes that although he grieved sincerely for the death of his mother, he also, at the same time, secretly revelled in the importance he acquired in the eyes of Salem House as a result of his loss) but I cannot remember whether I had any or not. It's possible that the crisis made me feel his absence with a new intensity, but I don't think it did. It is hard to say whether this was because I didn't particularly care that my father wasn't with us at such a time, or because I didn't really believe anything dreadful was about to happen.

I think I can say with certainty that I felt nothing that merited the name of fear during the crisis. This was not because I was a brave or devil-may-care sort of child. As a small boy I was extremely timid. I would lie in bed listening to all the creakings and bumpings of an old house in the night. Sometimes these had a comforting, familiar sound; at others they filled me with fear. My room was in the basement, with the rest of the family two floors up, and more than once I wet the bed rather than getting up to face the terrors.[4] As an even smaller boy my fears had concentrated specifically on the possibility of war breaking out—not nuclear war but the kind of war that involved, I thought, red-coated soldiers invading our back garden, and ships being sunk at sea. When these fears came upon me and made me cry in the night my father effectively calmed them by assuring me that war would not break out suddenly overnight, because all countries had spies to give advance warning. At the same period I had a fear of plague, and he reassured me over this by saying that there were men at the docks whose job was to prevent rats coming ashore from ships, and I still picture them as I did then, standing beside the gang-planks with big sticks ready to knock any invading rat on the head. This appealed to me so much that I was disappointed that my own children's fears were not such as could be assuaged by men with sticks on the dock-side.

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[2] He was away because he worked in Farnham and we lived in Blackheath.

[3] My younger sister Rosalind went with her. I believe the delay in her leaving was partly because Rosalind had to take her eleven plus before they went, although it may also be that she didn't want to leave me behind for a whole year.

I remained timid, although the things I feared changed. At Dulwich I was afraid most of the time, not of physical punishment but of humiliation, by masters, by prefects, or by my fellows. In the Classical Remove our form master was a man who terrorised the junior forms, and still terrified me, although everyone else had long realised that he was nothing but a buffoon. Even the most benign master could induce the symptoms, a knotted feeling in the stomach, a quivering of the limbs, a dry throat. I was also afraid of falling; standing on the high diving board or near the cliff-edge at Beachy Head could give me the same physical symptoms. I was terrified of needles and made a dreadful fuss about injections. I was already accustomed to being visited, without warning, by flashing images of great heights, imminent car crashes and other instances of sudden death.

Some would say that it is only in the presence of danger that real fear can be felt; that what I have described as fear is really a sort of nervousness. Perhaps that is so, but what I have described is the closest I had then come to being afraid. I have no recollection of anything of the sort in connection with the crisis, which suggests that I didn't really believe that anything dreadful was going to happen. I had no sense of being in the presence of danger.

I may have played at being afraid. Simon (13 at the time) says he has a vivid recollection of his class looking out of the window *expecting* to see a mushroom cloud. I may have done the same, but if so I'm sure in my case the expectation was more a matter of playing with the idea that perhaps it would happen. The crisis gave us a chance to frighten ourselves, and at the same time lend importance to the moment, and to ourselves as living through such a moment. It also, as Elspeth has reminded me, gave us an opportunity for macabre jokes, and extravagant thoughts about how we might spend our last four minutes. Philip, who was a student at St Andrews in 1962, remembers something else. He says that part of the V-bomber force was moved up to Leuchars, and that part of it was always in the air, one plane taking off as another landed. In 1962 there was still enough memory left over from the war (passed to us through films) of the sinister sound of aircraft overhead.[5] Perhaps Simon and his friends heard it. If I'd heard it I think I might have had more of a sense of danger.

I don't remember seeing anyone disrupting their routine or expressing great apprehension. Elspeth, however, has passed on reminiscences from friends which give a different picture. One was at a Catholic school in Dundee and recalls how a teacher told them sombrely that there was a grave situation in the world, and then led them in prayers for half an hour – I think she said half an hour. The other lived in Welwyn Garden City, with progressive, left-wing parents, Aldermaston marchers, and recalls that her mother bought in a large supply of food to face the crisis. Both reactions are more extreme than anything I recall myself, and what they suggest is the obvious point that people's response to the crisis was determined as much by their general world view as by the events themselves. Most of us thought that things would probably turn out all right and did not feel there was anything at all we could do about it. This mixture of casual pessimism and lazy optimism would not appeal to either the Catholic teacher or the Aldermaston intellectual, both of whom might be pre-disposed to take an apocalyptic view of the events, and to take themselves and their role on the world stage quite seriously.

A third friend of Elspeth's recalls feeling extremely apprehensive. She remembers looking out over the Meadows and thinking that she might not see them ever again. It is this visual association with a particular scene that lends authenticity to this memory, which one might otherwise have dismissed as something exaggerated or even fabricated after the event.[6]

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[4] Lest my parents should be called cruel for exiling me like this, I should say that it was at my earnest request that I had a bedroom in the basement. The terrors were only sporadic and I quickly forgot them and thought only of the advantages (although I can't now remember what they were).

[5] I recall a television play, probably a bit earlier than 1962, portraying a nuclear war. The final scene was of a family of survivors waiting for the bombers to reach them, and it ended on a sinister note, with them picking up the distant hum of aircraft.

Of all those I've asked, our friends the Jarvises were the most emphatic in recalling that they took seriously the threat of disaster. Marg had a very specific memory, which is entirely credible. She says that she was starting, or about to start, at University, and when she learned what was going on she thought, Damn, why should this happen just as her world was opening up? Pete was in Rhodesia, as it then was, and as news of the crisis reached him he was very apprehensive. Perhaps, like the Australians in *On the Beach*, he thought of the impending disaster as something from far away. We all felt powerless, but people in countries that were not involved, but who would be included in the disaster if it happened, must have felt doubly so.

Alan Bennett has given in a diary entry recently published in the LRB[7] his recollections of being in America at the time of the crisis. High jinks went on as usual, but he recalls the mood of foreboding, and his own anxieties. He and his *Beyond the Fringe* colleagues stuck together during the crisis, and would have preferred to be at home. He also mentions the account that was put about of his hiding under Dudley Moore's bed, which illustrates nothing so much as our tendency to turn our past into good stories. His own rebuttal of the account is itself a good story.

The crisis made no difference to my daily goings-on. I got up all that week, had breakfast, took the bus to school, came home and did my endless homework. But that doesn't prove that I was not worried by it all. What alteration could I have made to my routine? We had no fall-out shelter to hide in. I lost nothing by carrying on as usual. Four minutes was the warning period. The only thing that would have made any difference would have been for all of us, my mother, my sisters and me, to stay within four minutes of home, so that in the event of attack we could all die together. We had no idea how long the crisis would last—I think people were taken by surprise when Khrushchev cut it short at the end of the week by agreeing to dismantle the missile sites. Were we to disrupt our lives for an indefinite time in order to secure the marginal benefit of possibly dying together rather than apart? Was Jennifer to leave her digs and come home? One only has to say it to realise that it would have been absurd. Had we been certain that the worst would happen, then it would have been a different matter, but we were not certain. Had we thought it very likely, would we have stayed together? How likely would we have had to think it? All I can say is that we didn't think it likely enough to disrupt our routines on account of it.

Because I knew no-one who was taking the affair seriously, it did not occur to me that my mother might have been suffering particularly acutely on account of the separation from my father during those trying days. We must have spoken about the crisis, but I don't remember what we said; I don't even remember, as one sometimes does, the shadow of such a conversation without its substance. On other occasions we went together on demonstrations, but I'm pretty sure that this time neither of us joined in the demonstrations in Grosvenor Square.

Did she talk to her friends? Did any of them remember that she was on her own and come to see her or ring her up? She had a friend called Bessie Stephens, a junior school headmistress whom she respected; she had friends in the local CND group; her brother Alan lived ten minutes away by car. I was at school all day and doing homework or watching the television during the evening; so if she held agonized phone-calls with any of them, I wouldn't have known. Her mother lived in the house with us. She used to read the Daily Express and watch news programmes on the television, so she must have known about the crisis, but what if anything she thought about it I cannot say. I doubt if my mother would have discussed any serious worries with her.

When they moved to Farnham, where my father was always with her, she relied very much on him. She seemed then to have many friends, but none of them intimate. I don't know whether this was always the way. I understand so little about my parents' relationship, about what each needed from the other at such times of stress, that I can do no more than speculate on how separation affected them. Perhaps she missed his intellectual assurance, his capacity to analyse the situation, to tell her that things would come right; perhaps he missed the comfort of her physical presence, her common sense, her familiar ways. They must have mentioned it in their letters to each other, but they are lost.[8] I'm not sure whether they spoke on the telephone, either at this time or at any time during their separation. I suspect they didn't. They would have regarded it as an extravagance, like travelling in a taxi. Not for them.

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[6] Ursula made this point when she recalled her own apprehensions at the outbreak of war 1939, saying that she was inclined to believe her memory because it was focussed on a particular observation of preparations going on near her home near Coventry – I think search-lights and barrage balloons.

[7] *LRB* January 2013; his diary entry for 16 October 2012.

[8] I don't think I had more than a couple of letters from my father, which I have lost too. I may have written once

After the crisis the official line was that the world had been made a safer place. The hot-line between Washington and Moscow was established, and this, we were assured, would reduce the chance of accidental war. A year later the partial nuclear test-ban treaty was signed, which went some way to meeting the single most urgent demand of the nuclear disarmers. The cold war remained fairly static for almost twenty years, but things became unstable in the eighties, and again there was talk of possible nuclear annihilation. There was also, as Bernard has reminded me, Raymond Briggs's book *When the Wind Blows*, which was much more chilling and more affecting than any of the more solemn and factual warnings about nuclear war, such as *The War Game*.

The four minute warning was once more on our minds. As an adult I took it much more seriously than I had as a boy, believing that it was my duty to keep the family together to face whatever disasters might come. Whether this was a well thought out moral judgement or an instinct, I do not know, but it was a strong feeling, an urgent and difficult feeling. This is the best evidence I have as to my parents' attitude during the crisis. It is possible, even likely, that they were as unhappy that the family was dispersed during that week as I would have been in their place.

In the eighties we didn't disrupt our routine from fear of nuclear annihilation, any more than people had twenty years before, but I contemplated seriously the probability that we would have to do so. I used to wonder whether I would recognise the morning when it became necessary to stay away from work and keep the children home from school. I used to wonder whether I would have the courage to do it. These questions, not fear, were the things that kept me awake at night—not every night, perhaps not very often, but now and then. I used to tell myself that this was silly and melodramatic, self-indulgently so, but this rebuke did not chase away the questions, because they were not practical issues arising from a concrete and existing situation, but insistent doubts about my own integrity as a man and a father.

During the Cuban crisis I didn't, in fact, go on exactly as normal, because in addition to the regular news programmes, which led with the crisis day by day, there was an extra programme on the television reporting and analysing the day's developments, and I watched it every night.[9] I think it was introduced by the Times defence correspondent, Alun Gwynne Jones (later Lord Chalfont), an engaging figure. The programme took on something of the attraction of a soap opera as he and his colleagues became familiar, with their recognisable mannerisms and points of view. I almost felt disappointed when the crisis was over and the programme came to an end. This was partly because of the soap opera factor, but also, I think, because I felt that these were serious men, in serious suits, discussing serious matters and appealing to my intelligence. I felt that for those few days I had been a member of a club where the world's affairs were treated with all the care and thought that they deserved but so seldom received.

At the end of the last of these programmes, when Khrushchev had agreed to dismantle the missile sites, I remember them saying, these men in reassuring suits, with confident and confidential voices, that there was not going to be a war. I wish I could recall the specific tone, and the exact words, of this pronouncement. How surprised were they? They presumably thought that, at some points during the week, war had been on the cards. Were they sighing or exclaiming with relief? Hearing them, did I sigh and exclaim with relief? If I had, I think it likely that I would still remember it; and I don't.

Apart from that final declaration that there was not to be a war, I don't recall anything that was said on those programmes. In fact, my recollection of the details of the crisis is almost a complete blank. We took the Times rather than the Guardian in those days, because as a schoolboy I could get it at a reduced rate, and I almost certainly read it and probably cut things out for my cuttings book, but I've retained no memory of it at all. In the last couple of days I've been reading up about those weeks in October on the Times Digital Archive, and nothing I've seen has struck me as familiar from all those years ago.

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or twice, but I don't remember what I said to him. I wrote every week after my mother and Rosalind went out. I used to write on Saturday evenings, after watching *That was the week, that was*, and I suspect I wrote mainly about the satirical jokes I'd just been laughing at.

[9] The Times television listings during the week make no reference to this extra programme. I am sure I am right, however; the newspaper simply failed to keep up with the changes to the schedule.

One thing I've gathered from reading the back-numbers is that whereas it is now said that the crisis began when the Americans identified the missile sites, around the 14 or 15 October (that was when the fiftieth anniversary was marked), the President's speech reporting the sites' existence and imposing the naval quarantine around Cuba was not until Monday 22 October. Up until then there had been a rag-bag of reports about troop and ship movements, trade boycotts, piratical raids by Cuban exiles and so on. This sort of thing had been going on ever since the Cuban revolution, and there was nothing to indicate to an outsider that there was anything special in the air. We now know that by the time most of us knew that there was a crisis, at least one significant danger (that Kennedy might have been persuaded by others within the government to attack Cuba with overwhelming military force) was past. By the Wednesday, two days after the speech, it appeared from Khrushchev's reasoned reply to Bertrand Russell's telegram that the Russians were not going to react wildly to the quarantine and the American demands. This was interpreted by Wall Street as a positive sign, and the panic deals of previous days were reversed[10], but Kremlin politics were too mysterious and unpredictable for us to take much comfort. There were moments of extreme tension still to come, when the first Russian ship passed the quarantine line without being stopped, then when a Russian ship was stopped, searched and allowed to pass[11], and finally when an American spy-plane was shot down over Cuba. But before that last event could be digested, agreement had been reached, and we were assured that there was not going to be a war.

Didn't we talk about it later, when my parents and Rosalind came back from America? I think I'd have remembered it if we had, because I recall a fair bit about their return, although not enough to work out when exactly it took place. Imogen and I travelled down to Southampton to meet them. It was on the train that I realised that although I was taller than her standing up, she was the taller when we were sitting down. I was reading a C P Snow novel, I think *Homecomings*. My father had bought a new car, a Ford Cortina, and had arranged to pick it up in Southampton. It was the first bran new car he had owned, and the first saloon car.

We did talk to our parents about politics in the days and weeks following their return, I remember, but not about Cuba. My mother took part in a Civil Rights demonstration in Washington[12], and told us about their friends in the Civil Rights movement. There were horrific stories about racial violence: We make sure, said one of their friends, that we don't run out of gas in Virginia. Surely that's an exaggeration, I remember thinking, which reveals my childish inability to believe that things can be as bad as they are, and may explain why I had failed, or refused, to grasp the seriousness of the Cuban crisis. And as for us stay-at-homes, we had the Profumo affair to talk about. How could the theoretical possibility of nuclear annihilation compete with the spectacle of the whole closed-up-tight, smooth-tongued and dark-suited adult world falling apart, as we thought, before our eager and satirical eyes?

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[10] Share-prices dropped and the price of gold went up after the speech, swinging back by the end of the week. What does this tell us about how seriously the people with money believed that nuclear war was imminent? Buying gold was the standard reaction to uncertainty and chaos, but is hardly a rational response to the threat of sudden and universal death.

[11] This was a Panamanian owned ship flying the Lebanese flag, chartered by the Russians and sailing from Riga. Now called the Manucla it had started off as a Liberty ship called the Ben H. Miller, and had for ten years been called the City of Shrewsbury.

[12] I have always assumed that it was the great Washington March for Jobs and Freedom, but that did not take place until nearly the end of August 1963, and I think they were home by then. Rosalind has resolved the question for me: it was the Women's March for Freedom, in the spring, that our mother attended.