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A REMINDER OF “DUCK AND COVER” IN A NEW JERSEY FRONT YARD

David Mansfield, a former Dylan sideman, found a 1961 fallout shelter under his lawn. How did the danger sixty years ago compare with today’s threat?

By Ian Frazier

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From the high ridge in West Orange, New Jersey, where David Mansfield lives, you can see the towers of lower Manhattan on the horizon. Mansfield is a famous musician who plays violin, guitar, pedal steel guitar, mandolin, and Dobro, all of which he has in the basement studio of his ranch-style house on a quiet street. When asked if he went to Juilliard, he replied, “Well, I started touring with Bob Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue when I was nineteen, so . . .” (You can also see him fiddling on roller skates in Michael Cimino’s “Heaven’s Gate.”) He is soft-spoken and slim, with dark eyes and curly brown-and-gray hair.



David Mansfield Illustration by João Fazenda

Both Mansfield and his wife, Maggie, fell ill with COVID-19 in March. She was sicker than he was, but neither needed to be hospitalized. When they got better, he turned to long-neglected projects around the house. She suggested he get rid of some dead yew trees in the front yard. The yews surrounded a rusty iron pipe, about four and a half feet in diameter, with a round cover, set down vertically in the ground; he assumed it was some kind of drainage pipe. But the more he examined it, once the yews were gone, the odder it seemed. He sent an inquiry to the offices of the Township of West Orange, and a woman there quickly called him back. She had never come across such a thing before. She said that a building permit issued for that address in 1961 allowed for the construction of a steel fallout shelter.

“I looked through some rust holes in the top of the pipe and I saw a ladder,” Mansfield told a recent visitor. “Two of my daughters joined me. The oldest has a film degree, and she filmed me opening the hatch and going down. A lot of vines had grown into the entry tube, and the underground room itself was full of cobwebs, and hundreds of crickets covered the floor and ceiling. I brought in a Shop-Vac and vacuumed everything. The crickets were kind of sluggish, but when I emptied them out into a patch of sunlight they came to life.”

For the visitor’s benefit he lifted the hatch and led the descent. To use the ladder, you turn backward and feel for the rungs with your feet. At the bottom, there’s a kind of entryway that you duck through, and then you’re in a chamber with an arched ceiling maybe seven feet high. The space is about eight feet across by twelve feet long, and when you talk the sound echoes with a metallic reverb. “Basically, it’s a David Bowie tin can,” Mansfield said. He pointed out a yellow-and-black “FALLOUT SHELTER” sign, of the sort that the Office of Civil Defense used to post in school basements; he bought it on Amazon and hung it on the wall to perk up the place. The temperature was a few degrees cooler in the room than the warm spring afternoon aboveground. On the floor in a corner was a small wooden crate, upside down, that said “Hoffman Beverages” on its side.

A short stay in the shelter gives a new appreciation for the birdsong and greenery and breezes up top, in unconfined New Jersey. After climbing out, Mansfield and the visitor sat on the deck behind the house and looked through the trees at the distant new World Trade Center and its neighboring skyscrapers. Maybe the person who installed the bomb shelter imagined escaping into it, staying for the recommended two weeks, and reëmerging to find Manhattan nuked and gone. “Like Charlton Heston, he would come out and look to the east, and say, ‘What have you *done*?’” Mansfield said, holding up his arms beseechingly.

“I did some research, and I found that fallout shelters like this one sold for a hundred and fifty dollars—not a lot, even for the time,” he went on. “Installing a shelter was a patriotic act, so that we Americans could survive a war with the Russians. And then the Cuban missile crisis happened the year after this shelter was installed. Funny to remember when nuclear war was what we worried about—all those drills, putting our heads under our desks in school. It’s weird to be going through this pandemic and sheltering here for a different reason. And nuclear war now seems maybe not so bad. In the bigger picture, climate change will be worse.”

On the corner of the deck stood a wire plant stand. Somewhat rusted, it, too, had been in the fallout shelter. The plant stand’s design recalled the era when objects began to be made of interestingly twisted wire. “That plant stand was the only other object in the fallout shelter, besides the beverage crate,” Mansfield said. “I thought I’d bring it out and put it here.”

He and the visitor regarded the plant stand in silence. After a few moments’ mental sojourn in the sixties, Mansfield added, pensively, “Eddie Haskell just died.” ♦

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