

The Bombs

The other day I drove by my old elementary school. It brought back a half-century-old memory causing the palms of my hands to sweat and my gut to knot up. I don't why but my left arm began to hurt. I was in the first grade at the time and I'm amazed how an old experience is still fresh in my mind as if it had been yesterday.

In the early sixties, we moved to San Antonio, Texas. My mom enrolled me at Bonham Elementary School a few blocks from our home. The first years at the elementary school were rough and challenging, but that is another story. I didn't speak English, and I had to rely on my classmates to translate what the teacher said. Asking classmates for help was a dreadful challenge, and more often than not painful.

Back in those days, teachers didn't need much of an excuse to spank, paddle, or smack kids in the head with their yardstick. My teacher's yardstick found my head several times a day. She was quick and accurate with the stick. Many times I tried to protect my head but my hands were much too slow. The teacher would tell me not to speak Spanish; which was difficult for me since Spanish was the only language I knew. I was new at the elementary school and I felt lost and alone.

One day, the teacher spoke and the classroom became dead silent. All the kids stared at the teacher in disbelief. Besides the scary quiet classroom, what troubled me most were the facial expressions of my classmates. Even the class bullies looked scared. I had never seen the class so attentive, to the teacher, and that worried me. Not sure what to do I took the chance and asked a boy sitting next to me to tell me what was going on. He feared the teacher's yardstick as much as I did and told me he would tell me later. I sat at my desk listening to the teacher but understanding nothing. What I did understand was that it was not good. All my classmates looked worried and some of them looked like they wanted to cry.

Later that afternoon I asked several bilingual kids to tell me what the teacher said in class. They said San Antonio was a target and was going to be destroyed. I did not understand what they meant about San Antonio being a target, so I asked them to explain it to me. A little girl said that Fidel Castro had some nuclear missiles,

in Cuba, pointed at San Antonio. He is going to launch them to destroy all the military bases in the surrounding area.

I did not believe the bomb story. It sounded awful. The kids at school harassed me a lot and used to make fun of me all the time. I did not believe the nuclear missiles story, but something did not check out. Why were they so worried? Even the older kids in other classes looked uneasy and scared. I was not convinced my classmates were telling me the truth.

After school, I looked for Senior Martinez, one of the school's custodians. Senior Martinez was always nice to me. He once gave some cake he brought from home and I figured he would tell me the truth.

I found him in the cafeteria mopping the floor. He spoke Spanish as well as I did so I asked him. He was a cheerful man always smiling but not that day. Indeed he confirmed what all the kids had told me but in much greater detail. Senior Martinez said there would no time to run from the nuclear missiles. Several military bases surround San Antonio were targeted for destruction. The nuclear blasts would valorize the military bases as well as the city.

When I got home, I sat on the porch waiting for mom. She worked at a sewing factory downtown. It seemed forever before I saw her walking down the street towards the house. I ran to meet her and told her what I learned at school that day about San Antonio targeted for destruction by nuclear missiles.

Mom looked nervous and that scared me. She knew all about Castro, Cuba, the Russians, and the missiles. The factory owner where she worked had informed all the employees of the Cuban Missile Crisis. He also said when they hear the factory siren; they had to go to the building basement, to protect themselves from the nuclear explosions. I did not know what to think. The only experience I had with blasts had been with fireworks. I burnt my finger once with a sparkler which caused a severe burn. The pain lasted for days and it had been a small burn.

Two days later, I was in the house next door with my friend watching his television set. The man in the television talked about atomic bombs and about their destructive abilities. The reporter on the television showed an atomic bomb detonated in the desert somewhere. The atomic blast pulverized houses tossed cars into the air like toys. The man in the television explained it was a small atomic explosion conducted by the United States

military. The missiles that Fidel Castro had pointing at the USA were larger, nuclear, and more powerful. The devastation I saw on the television, of the test bomb, shocked and frightened me.

That following Monday the teacher talked about the nuclear missiles again and the boy sitting next to me told me that we had to practice a bomb drill. I had never heard of such a thing and asked for an explanation. He saw the yardstick in the teacher's hand and waited for an opportunity. He leaned over and said to watch him and do as he did.

The teacher spoke and all the kids got up, they cleared their desk, got under their table, and pulled in the chair behind them. I watched and did as they did. The boy next to me said that I had to hold my knees together, put my face against my legs, and close my eyes tight. I asked him why I needed to close my eyes. He said per the teacher's instructions we had to close our eyes to prevent blindness or having the eyes burnt out. The teacher said the intense brightness and heat would blind you.

The teacher gave another instruction; everyone got out from under the desks and sat back down on the chairs again. I asked the boy what was next. He said that we had to practice the bomb drill one more time but this time we had to wait until the school sounded the alarm. I asked him what alarm. The boy said that when you hear three long siren blasts that meant that the missiles are going to hit San Antonio. We had to do the bomb drill as we had been practicing.

The teacher asked the class if they were ready. I was nervous, I wanted to do it right, and did not want to make any mistakes. After a short time, I heard three long siren blasts. Everyone cleared off their desk. They got under the table, pulled in the chair behind them, held their knees together, put their face against their legs, and closed their eyes. They were a lot of instructions but I remembered them and did the bomb drill. As I got under my desk, I noticed that I had been faster than most of the class. It had been my first bomb drill, and I had been faster than most of the class. I felt good about that because I was good at something especially something as important as a bomb drill.

Later that afternoon I sat on my porch waiting for mom to come home from work. I wanted to tell her all about the bomb drill. It seemed like hours and hours before I saw mom walking around the corner. As fast as I could, I ran down the street to meet her. In one breath, I told her all about the drill, how good I had done, that I

was faster than most of the class, and that it had been my first bomb drill. I told her that I cleared off my desk, got under the desk, held their knees together, put their face against their legs, and closed their eyes.

Mom lets me talk and talk, she was good at letting me talk. I was feeling good about myself because I was good at something. That night I remembered the bomb drill and thought of ways how I could improve and be faster. In the back of my head, I had my doubts about the school drills. What I saw on the television a couple of days ago lingered in my mind. The television announcer said what we saw a small test boob. The atomic test bomb, in the desert, flattened large brick buildings and pulverized wooden buildings. Car and trucks flew in the air like toys. The television announcer showed images of the destruction of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The images of the cities were beyond horrible. Senior Martinez was right when he said there was no use in running San Antonio would cease to exist.

A few days later mom was nervously gathering all the loose coins that she could find in the house and began counting the money that she had saved. She heard President Kennedy urging the people to stock up on food and water in preparation for the Cuban missile attack. Mom said that I had to go to school and that afternoon when she came home, we would go to the grocery store to buy what food she could.

On my way to school, I walked by a newsstand stand and on the newspaper cover, I read the words Cuba and missiles. I could not read the rest but I did recognize the words Cuba and missiles.

Later that day at school, the teacher was giving a lesson when all of a sudden the school alarm went off. It was loud and it shocked me. All the kids jumped up and from the corner of my eye, I saw the teacher moving fast across the classroom. I felt panic and a chill run down my back. My legs felt like lead and the faster I wanted to move the slower my legs responded. Desperation hit like I never felt before. I thought I would not make it under the desk, in time, before the missiles struck. My feet stumbled because I had my eyes closed tight.

The teacher said the bright light and intense heat caused by the bomb blast would burn your eyes out. It seemed like an eternity before I made it under the desk. I held my knees together, put my face against my legs, and I already had my eyes closed. My body shook with fear. Images of my mother and sister flashed in my mind. In an instant tears squeezed out of my closed eyes fearing we would never see each other again. Fearing death and the pain associated with dying by fire made me want to vomit. The words did not come out, but I

called out for my mother, I did not want to die alone. I wanted to be with my mother and sister. The loud screams in the background made me fear even more. I forced my mind to ignore the screams and closed my eyes even tighter. There came a loud slam, on top of my desk, that startled me. The chair next to me flew out from under the desk. I held my knees tighter and shoved my face against my legs as hard as I could and dared not open my eyes. Something hard struck my head. It was painful and thought it was the beginning, of the end. I wanted my mother. I wanted to see her one last time. I did not want to die alone. Next, I felt a sharp pain from my left arm; my body come off the floor, and I flew out from under the desk like the cars and trucks I saw on the television.

Kids screamed loud and I imagined them burning. I tried my best not hear them but the more I listen the more it sounded like laughter. After paying close attention I understood and yes it did sound more like laughter. The teacher screamed at me but I did not understand her. I wanted to open my eyes but I was afraid my eyes would be burnt out. I felt I was being dragged across the floor by my arm. The pain in my arm was unbearable and I was forced to open my eyes. It was the teacher and she was angry. All the kids were in the hallway watching us through the door laughing. The teacher pulled me off the floor by my arm and walking me out of the classroom.

The class walked single file out of the building to the playground. I saw all the other classes doing the same. We were the last class to exit the building. All this time the kids laughed and called me all sorts of things. Some things I understood and others I did not. I felt so confused, I felt so stupid, and I felt so humiliated. The school principal stood in front of all the classes and said a few things then all the classes started to go back into the building one-by-one. When it was my class's turn to go in, I hid and stayed behind. From my hiding place, I held my aching arm and watched everyone go back into the building. When the schoolyard was clear, everyone had returned; I walked out of my hiding place and walked home holding my arm.

I sat on the porch waiting for mom thinking of what had happened at school. I did not go back to school for a few days, and I never told mom what had happened. It was later that I found out that the school also had fire drills.

Amilcar (Aumi) Hernandez

mystories@aumih.info