



It can happen anywhere

Written for "The Listener"

By

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THERE were bombers overhead, and away in the distance I could sometimes hear one of those whistling bombs. A man once told me that you could sound a particular note on a particular whistle and you could shake a building to its foundations. The reverberations would be just right, or something like that. I did not believe him until I heard the whistling bombs, and then when my spine started to disintegrate I knew.

But that's all by the way. On this particular night we were not worried about anything of that nature. You don't when you're like we were, except that you feel a bit more paternal, or protective, or proprietary, whatever it is that makes people so unselfish in that very selfish way that goes into a four-letter word that no one quite likes to mention in case it's thought he knows something about it.

We had stopped on a street corner. It was in Featherston Street, beside the G.P.O., in Wellington, and it was just after the attack had begun. But we were in whatever-you-call-it and we did not mind very much, except that shortly I was going to be transferred from the Home Guard to go on active service. This night I was to report for duty at 9 o'clock.

We were having a walk after a meal and things were pretty good, except for the bombers that sounded as if they were away up and over where the workshops and factories are. I remembered that I had thought it was time they painted those . . . in camouflage because you could see them twenty miles away. I know that for a fact, because I had a look that time I came down from Auckland in a hurry in the Lockheed. All the way I imagined myself dropping bombs and believe me I saw some pretty good targets.

WE were standing, then, on this street corner, when a car came batting along Featherston Street from the Railway Station with its lights doused and another along Grey Street from Lambton

Quay. They crossed that intersection, I am sure, at no less than thirty miles an hour, and they missed each other by about ten feet.

"What do you think?" she said. "What if one of those men had slowed his car back there to light a cigarette?"

"Yes," I said, "they would have met fair in the middle," and I thought that I would have had more than a good excuse to put an arm round her and say: "Don't look dear, it's not nice."

"Well," she said, "it's lucky they didn't meet."

There was an explosion, dull and sort of indistinct, away to the north, and I thought it would perhaps not have mattered to either of them if they had met, but I did not treat the matter seriously because shortly I had to report and there was only an hour with her before then.

INSTEAD of that I got talking about what happens to prevent things meeting at street corners, and what happens to make them meet. I have some knowledge of the weather, you know, having been through the meteorological office one week-end, introduced by a chap that works there and sometimes has a beer in my pub.

So I told her about where the weather comes from. I explained about the cyclones away off in Australia and how the air has to rush in to fill the holes. I made it clear to her by suggesting that she get a pair of bellows and evacuate them. Then she would see that the air had to rush in to fill the gap, and it was the same with a depression (or a cyclone, or whatever).

She said: "Yes, that's pretty clear," and we talked for a while about that extraordinary word "evacuate."

There was some danger that the conversation would become impolite, and as we did not know each other very well yet we made tracks back to the weather. We talked about a piece of snow that might be lying on the Great Barrier in Antarctica, and how the sun might shine more strongly some day and that piece of snow might evaporate through the dry air and come up into the wind that was blowing towards New Zealand. And how it would then be blown along north and drift here and there until it came in the moisture-charged air above our land mass.

And about how the heat from the land would come up into the upper air and

cause condensation. About how that drop of moisture which was the crystal of snow would by now be carrying a host of microbes and small insects of that type which uses so much more of the world than we do and makes so much less fuss about it, except in time of epidemic.

Then we imagined the moisture condensing into a droplet of rain and falling through the dust of the air and gathering other moisture to itself, and more microbes and insects, and becoming a living thing hurtling down to the earth.

About how it might miss the land (since New Zealand is no doubt a very small target from five miles up) and how it might fall into the sea. About how it might splash in the sea near a fish. About how that fish might be a cod, a blue cod, living in the dark places among the rocks, and how it might see that certain splash and come to the surface with its mouth open. About how that raindrop that was a piece of snow might go down its mouth and help nourish it.

And about how a certain man from the city might wish to go fishing with line and sinker, and how that cod that took in the raindrop so unsuspectingly might easily go for the piece of mussel he has tied on his line and get caught, and get taken home, and get stewed in butter in a pot on a gas stove and get eaten garnished with butter and milk and parsley sauce.

About how it might give the man a kick so that he is kind that evening to his wife and dries the dishes, and how she might love him for this unusual consideration and get so morbid the next night when he is distracted with the halfpenny that won't balance that she goes down to the waterfront and gets past the cop that stands at the gate, and chucks herself in with the electric iron tied round her neck.

WHEN we had talked of these things it was still not sufficient, because your imagination seems to get going when there are bombs coming down, whistling bombs, only a few miles away, so we went on to discuss the probable history of coincidence behind the life of the mussel that tempted the cod, and the fish that tempted the husband, and the husband that tempted the wife, and the long long peace that tempted the wife in the end. It was good fun.

She said after a while: "I wonder what it's all about?" Which set us going on how I had met her and how she had

met me. We got quite romantic and a little more bold than I thought might have been possible at that stage.

She said: "I like bathrooms with blue tiles." I said that although I'd like a garden it would be interesting to have a place where there would be room for one of those hydroponic tanks. That set us going on how interesting it would be to have some line you could follow, like what nourishes plants, and how fascinating it would be to grow plants synthetically like that and find out for yourself just in what way they differed from the real thing.

There had been a time before the war when I would have some nights free during the week and I had found time to read, between recovering from the week-end and getting some sleep in before the next one, Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World."

Then we got talking about making babies in test tubes and conditioning them with gramophone records, and how nice it would be for a man like Hitler if he could get going on something like that. After that it's just a shame what we said, but I'm glad now we said it.

AT any rate, nine o'clock was getting pretty near and we were sitting on a bus-waiting-seat near the sea. There were still some aeroplanes flying round away off but we could not tell whether they were theirs or ours, not yet having got used to that sort of thing.

About five to nine I said I'd have to go, and that it was time I went off to save Democracy, in that sort of way you say things jokingly in case it's thought you really mean them and have some ideas on the subject. So she said, "What about me bringing you a cup of tea later on?"

I thought this a great idea from a person who had just said she was going to marry me, so I said, "Please don't bother, you know I don't go in for that sort of thing."

"Please let me do it," she said, "because I should so much like to do something for you."

So we argued a bit, very pleasantly and in between what-you-do-at-such-times, and in the end I said thanks very much and I'd be at such and such a place on my patrol at such and such a time.

Then she got on a tram and I went off and reported.

(Continued on next page)