



THE NUCLEAR AGE

TIM O'BRIEN

A K N O P F  B O O K

Books by Tim O'Brien

If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973)

Northern Lights (1975)

Going After Cacciato (1978)

The Nuclear Age (1985)

The—————
NUCLEAR
—————*Age*

Tim O'Brien

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Portions of this novel appeared in different form in *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Pushcart Prize 1985*. The author wishes to thank the editors of those publications and to express gratitude for support received from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

The principal characters and incidents in this book are wholly imagined. By and large, the author has tried to remain faithful to the flow of public events between the years 1945 and 1995, but on occasion it has seemed appropriate to amend history, most conspicuously by addition. What is important, the author believes, is not what happened, but what could have happened, and, in some cases, should have happened.

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*For my mother and father,
for Kathy and Greg,
and for Ann*

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And the dead will be thrown out like dung,
and there will be no one to offer comfort.
For the earth will be left empty and its
cities will be torn down. None will be left
to till the ground and sow it. The trees
will bear fruit, but who will gather it?
The grapes will ripen, but who will tread them?
There will be vast desolation everywhere.
For one man will long to see another, or to
hear his voice. For ten will be left, out of
a city, and two, out of a field, who have
hidden in the thick woods or in holes in the rocks.

The Second Book of Esdras
16:23–29

FISSION

Quantum Jumps

A MI CRAZY? It's after midnight, and I kiss my wife's cheek and quietly slide out of bed. No lights, no alarm. Blue jeans and work boots and a flannel shirt, then out to the backyard. I pick a spot near the tool shed. A crackpot? Maybe, maybe not, but listen. The sound of physics. The soft, breathless whir of Now.

Just listen.

Close your eyes, pay attention: Murder, wouldn't you say? A purring electron? Photons, protons? Yes, and the steady hum of a balanced equation.

I use a garden spade. High over the Sweetheart Mountains, a pale dwarf moon gives light to work by, and the air is chilly, and there is the feel of a dream that may last forever. "So do it," I murmur, and I begin digging.

Turn the first spadeful. Then bend down and squeeze the soil and let it sift through the fingers. Already there's a new sense of security. Crazy? Not likely, not yet.

If you're sane, anything goes, everything, there are no more particulars.

It won't be easy, but I'll persevere.

At the age of forty-nine, after a lifetime of insomnia and midnight peril, the hour has come for seizing control. It isn't madness. It isn't a lapse of common sense. Prudence, that's all it is.

Balance of power, balance of mind—a tightrope act, but where's the net? Infinity could split itself at any instant.

“Doom!” I yell.

Grab the spade and go to work.

Signs of sanity: muscle and resolve, arms and legs and spine and willpower. I won't quit. I'm a man of my age, and it's an age of extraordinary jeopardy. So who's crazy? Me? Or is it you? You poor, pitiful sheep. Listen—Kansas is on fire. What choice do I have? Just dig and dig. Find the rhythm. Think about those silos deep in fields of winter wheat. *Five, four, slam the door.* No metaphor, the bombs are real.

I keep at it for a solid hour. And later, when the moon goes under, I slip into the tool shed and find a string of outdoor Christmas lights—reds and blues and greens—rigging them up in trees and shrubs, hitting the switch, then returning to the job.

Silent night, for Christ sake. There's a failure of faith. When the back door opens, I'm whistling the age-old carol.

“Daddy!” Melinda calls.

Now it starts.

In pajamas and slippers, ponytailed, my daughter trots out to the excavation site. She shivers and hugs herself and whispers, “What's happening? What the heck's going *on*?”

“Nothing,” I tell her.

“Oh, sure.”

“Nothing, princess. Just digging.”

“Digging,” she says.

“Right.”

“Digging what?”

I swallow and smile. It's a sensible question but the answer carries all kinds of complications. “A hole,” I say. “What else?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Just a hole. See? Simple, isn't it? Come on, baby, back to bed now—school tomorrow.”

“Hole,” Melinda mutters.

She folds her arms and looks at me with an expression that is at once stern and forgiving. A strange child. Twelve years old, but very