OUR FAR-FLUNG CORRESPONDENTS

FALLOUT
Paducah's secret nuclear disaster.
BY BOBBIE ANN MASON

On the national radar screen, Paducah, Kentucky, is a provincial town with a funny name, but here in the western end of the state it was never an inconsequential place. I grew up on a farm near the small town of Mayfield, and Paducah was so far away—twenty-six miles—that we went there only on special occasions. It was the city, the Mecca for several counties of farmland. It had department stores, fine ladies' shops, movie theatres. I was dazzled when, as a child in the nineteen-forties, I went shopping with my grandparents on a Saturday. We dressed up and wandered through the riverfront Market House, where exotic produce— even oysters—arrived by train. On the way into Paducah, we passed the railroad repair shop, with huge locomotives squatting in the yard—an impressive sight that made me think important industry occurred here, something that linked our area to the whole world.

Downtown Paducah was ritzy. In high school, I attended a dance at the swank pseudo-Tudor Hotel Irvin Cobb, named for a novelist and humorist who had appeared in a movie. He won the O. Henry prize for the best short story in America in 1922. But Paducah's true star was Alben W. Barkley, who was born in a log house and worked his way up in society and politics through a long career in Congress, eventually becoming Vice-President under Harry S. Truman. After President Truman dropped atomic bombs on Japan to end the Second World War, Barkley—Paducah's favorite son—contrived to bring one of the nation's first atomic plants to his home turf. Everybody called it the bomb plant, even though it didn't really make bombs; it processed and enriched the fuel for them. Paducah, Barkley argued, had just the location—the site of the Kentucky Ordnance Works, which had manufactured explosives for conventional bombs during the last war. It was a logical shift to the new technology that America's defense depended on. And, in a gesture of pork-barrel politics gone nuclear, Barkley bequeathed a lasting gift to his hometown—uranium.

The Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant began enriching uranium fuel in 1952. This top-secret business was something like increasing the octane in gasoline—putting the oomph in the bomb. Helping to create A-bombs was a tidy, lucrative endeavor, and Paducah began to change. The first apartment buildings I ever saw shot up while the plant was being built, in the early fifties. Twenty thousand construction workers jammed the town, and local people rented out spare rooms and barn stalls—any available nook—for the newcomers to sleep in. At a time when "The Walt Disney Story of Our FRIEND the Atom" was a popular book, and Nikita Khrushchev's name was on every tongue, and Sputnik was terrifyingly in orbit above us, Paducah was called upon to be alert—and secretive—in exchange for good jobs and the chance to beat the Russians. It wasn't afraid. Doomsday wasn't going to happen in Paducah, not as long as the plant helped supply the nation with its friendly atomic arsenal.

Today, the plant enriches uranium for nuclear-power reactors instead of atomic bombs, but workers still affectionately call it the bomb plant. License-plate holders from the nineteen-seventies show Paducah's namesake, Chief Paduke, on the left and an atomic cloud on the right, framing the words "Paducah, the Atomic City."

Last summer, Paducah's deal with atomic energy seemed to be exposed as a bargain with the Devil. The news was packaged in one explosive bundle in the Washington Post, on August 8th: radioactive waste dumps, safety violations, bureaucratic lies, cancer, environmental pollution. Whistle-blowers, in a sealed lawsuit filed in June (it has since been opened), charged that...
former operators had defrauded the
government by covering up knowledge
of widespread radiation contamination,
without regard for the safety of the
workers. The Post reported stories of
nuclear waste being treated lackadaisically—as if it were no more dangerous
than kitchen compost. Workers rou-
tinely breathed heavy black uranium
dust, and some said that supervisors
about safety conditions, although the
plant was becoming its own toxic-waste
dump—tons of radioactive scrap metal
and cylinders of depleted uranium were
piling up with nowhere to go. Toxic trash
was tossed over the fence into an ad-
joining wildlife area, and local wells had
become contaminated. Then plutonium
was detected in a ditch outside the fence.
And a radioactive, technetium-tainted
years during the late seventies. I E-
mailed her in Florida, where she now
lives. "I guess I was exposed," she an-
swered. "But don’t worry. If you got it
you got it, and there is nothing that can
be done—but maybe it can for the next
generation." She reminded me how
good the plant had been to its employees.
The salaries were the highest around,
and the benefits were off the scale. Be-

sprinkled it on the cafeteria food—to
prove that the dust was harmless.
Workers handled so much of a uranium
compound called greensalt that their
skin turned green, like the Jolly Green
Giant’s. Their bed sheets at home were
stained green.

Even worse, the Post reported that
many workers had also unwittingly han-
dled plutonium—for decades. Plutonium,
which is deadly and cancer-causing, was
never supposed to be at the Paducah
plant. It had arrived during the Cold
War, along with other highly radioactive
fission by-products, as an impurity in
shipments of used uranium. And it re-
mained in the plant, like an unwelcome
guest, dirtying up the place. The pluto-
nium was in the uranium dust that the
workers breathed.
The workers never made much fuss
underground plume of water was inch-
ing toward the Ohio River. Paducah,
exemplary heartland town, where peo-
ple went to church and gave the time
of day to strangers, thought it had been
spared such modern ills. The local
press—the Paducah Sun—had down-
played the dangers. Until the Washin-
ton Post showed up, it was as though all
the toxic trash were just part of the fur-
niture—the price Paducah paid to have
a thriving economy, the price paid to
help win the Cold War.

Plutonium is heavy and it doesn’t
move fast, but, when I heard that it was
present at our local nuclear-fuel refinery,
I felt as if a plutonium-polluted plume
were headed toward me. This wasn’t
Chernobyl—a nuclear power plant run
amok. It was personal. My sister had
worked at the bomb plant for several
sides, she told me, everything was so se-
cret there. Nobody talked. You felt you
were doing something important,
something good for the country.

It was late in the dust-bowl sum-
ner, and dust from the desiccated fields
sifted onto my car when I drove to Pa-
ducah from my home in central Ken-
tucky. I was trying to think of a reason-
able synonym for "freaked out," which
was just about how I felt. The guy who
pumped my gas said there was too much
else to worry about in this world for him
to be concerned about loose isotopes or
technetium seepage. Wars, earthquakes,
and such.

From Paducah, I continued west to
Future City, where construction workers
were housed when the plant was being
built. Now it was just a crossroads, with
a grocery and a barbecue eatery. The
bomb plant was nearby, and just up a parallel road was Heath High School. The school had been the site, in 1997, of one of the first of the string of school shootings. A fourteen-year-old boy gunned down three of his classmates in a prayer meeting in the lobby. I remembered the reporters and the television crews descending on the place like paramedics, and I imagined that Paducah must feel jinxed now. The atomic-waste scare was bringing the news crews rushing back. The same barbecue joint fed both frenzies. I came to a halt at the crossroads. I was reluctant to look at either of these scenes—the plant or the school—and I didn’t know if it was from fear or from sadness. I drove back to Paducah.

DOTTIE BARKLEY has been a family friend for twenty years. When she was seven years old, she was a guest on “I’ve Got a Secret,” one of the old TV quiz-game shows. Her secret was that her grandfather was Vice-President Alben W. Barkley, Paducah’s local hero. On another occasion, she was taken to the Plaza Hotel in New York, where she pitched a fit because the Palm Court didn’t serve catfish. She cried, “If I can’t have catfish, then I don’t want anything!”

We were sitting in Dottie’s back yard among morning glories and gourd vines. Seven cats and Winnie, a chow-shar-pei mix, crowded around us. “This is outrageous,” Dottie said, fuming about the local coverage. “The other Sunday, the Louisville Courier-Journal had a big front-page story about plutonium in Paducah, but there wasn’t a peep about it in the Paducah Sun until the next day. Most of Paducah didn’t even know about this!”

Did she think people felt betrayed? I asked. “Hell, most people don’t really care,” she said. “Everybody at the plant knew they were working with dangerous stuff. Maybe they didn’t all know it was plutonium, but they knew. Now people don’t want to talk about it. They don’t want to lose their jobs.”

To visualize Dottie, imagine Marilyn Monroe—outfitted by the Limited—with a pickup truck. She’s gloriously bohemian, with a blond heap of curly hair. And, as Alben Barkley’s granddaughter, she holds a unique position in Paducah, even though she avoids the cocktail party carrousel of the local big dudes, where she might rightfully belong—not her style. She works at the Party Mart (“Paducah’s Most Interesting Store”).

She explained how the plant got here. “G randaddy just muscled it through. He was best friends with Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn. And it was such an exciting thing when the plant came! The plant gave people good jobs. It kept a lot of people from starving. And now let’s look at what’s happened. There’s so much good—and so much horror.” She shouldered, “Grandaddy couldn’t have imagined this. He couldn’t have known how it would turn out. Could he?”

A cat named Dinah Shore jumped into my lap. “Dear Hearts and Gentle People”—the song by the real Dinah—ran through my mind. I thought of the fifties, when a war-weary nation quelled its fears of the bomb by listening to songs like this, or to Doris Day’s “Que Sera, Sera.”

Dottie said, “The people out at the plant were so innocent back when it started. They used to handle uranium with their bare hands!” She bent over briefly to hug her dog. “You know, you should talk to my ex-husband Joe. He’s worked at the bomb plant for twenty-six years, and he can tell you what it’s like. They’re like a big family out there, and he’s been exposed to just about everything.”

As I was leaving, I noticed a photograph in the dining room of Dottie with her parents and her grandfather, taken when Barkley Airport was dedicated, in 1948. Dottie, a child in a shiny taffeta dress with a cross-sash, has a missing front tooth.

“Look at me in my queen outfit,” Dottie said, laughing at herself in the picture. “Get Joe to take you out to the bomb plant. It’s so eerie.”

A DIFFERENT Joe, Joe Harding, had known about the dangers years ago. He died in 1980, of stomach cancer. He began working at the plant in 1952, and his jobs included flushing impurities out of the processing pipes. Apparently, a residue of all kinds of radioactive things—plutonium, neptunium, and other contaminants—remained in the system once the processing was completed. Even today, there is a residue clinging to the pipes, like what’s left in the skillet after you cook onions. Harding was chronically ill, but when he declared that he had radiation poisoning no one believed him. He had weird toenail-like growths coming out of his elbows and kneecaps, but people only laughed. The management said his illnesses were caused by eating too much country ham. His disability benefits and insurance claims were denied. A few years after his death, lawyers representing his widow ordered that his body be exhumed, and his bones revealed a level of uranium hundreds of times above normal.

Normal? Radiation is good for you; it boosts the immune system, according to a local engineer in an August 25, 1999, San column. “Radiation . . . may benefit the health of those exposed . . . a low dose of radiation actually increases immunity,” he wrote. The plant’s neighbors must glow with good health, then, because radioactive technetium-99 has turned up in the gardens—in banana peppers and turnip greens. Traces of plutonium were found in deer in the wildlife sanctuary—not enough to hurt you, officials said. To be in any kind of danger, “You would have to eat the whole deer,” the Kentucky state health commissioner insisted on TV last summer—his remark delivered with the fervor of a political stump speech. Why, I wondered, do people always seem to be telling us that we can eat radioactive waste?

DOWNTOWN is “Historic Paducah”—antique stores, funky shops, and Saturday-night street parties. Like many other towns, Paducah is energetically reclaiming itself from the mall, and you can almost imagine the main street in its heyday. Tourists from the Mississippi Queen and the Delta Queen stream in through gates in the flood wall, which is being painted with murals depicting the history of the city. The showpiece of downtown is a quilt museum. Paducah is morphing from the Atomic City to the Quilt City. You might think that quaint old quilts are a clever atomic-age coverup, but the museum is on the cutting edge. Its quilts are postmodern.

I was headed for the Paducah Public Library. I had been mulling over the phrases “acceptable risk” and “eat the
whole deer.” (“I can’t believe I ate the whole deer!”) And, for that matter, just what is a “trace”? What is an acceptable number of picocuries of plutonium? How many would you want to have settle in your brain, your lungs, your islets of Langerhans?

Plant managers claim that the amount of plutonium that came to Paducah was only twelve ounces—a piddling amount. Neptunium may be a worse problem. It is less radioactive than plutonium, but forty pounds of it were brought to the plant in the ill-fated uranium shipments. Plutonium and neptunium are transuranics, metals that are heavier than uranium. They are artificially created radioactive elements. They don’t occur in nature; they pop up when atoms are split. I knew that plutonium is a hundred thousand times as radioactive as uranium, with a half-life of twenty-four thousand years—longer than civilization has existed. A beeline to the encyclopedia revealed to me what no one was admitting: twelve ounces is a lot. Theoretically, that much plutonium contains as much energy as nearly six thousand tons of TNT. More to the point, it’s incredibly toxic, even in microscopic amounts. The “safe” dose for a human being is 0.13 micromgrams. Thus twelve ounces is enough to provide a maximum legal limit of ingested plutonium for about two and a half billion people, or nearly half the world.

Around town, though, people didn’t seem worried. There were virtually no letters to the editor of the Paducah Sun, and few people seemed willing to voice any fear of atomic pollution—as though talking about radioactivity might be enough to shut the plant down. TV NewsChannel 6 (which is owned by the Sun’s parent company) seemed more alarmed by weather scares than by radioactive-waste dumps or the presence of plutonium in the food chain.

I chatted a while with Iris Garrett, one of the librarians, and she reminded me that that was how folks were around here. “There’s a sense that they took the risk for the jobs,” she said. “They went along with it. People here are concerned about personal and emotional things—like the shooting at Heath. That’s when everybody gets in a stir, when it touches you personally.”

Iris, who had three flashy earrings in her left ear and one in her right, leaned forward. She said, “But the news is sinking in. Every day, something new comes out. Everybody’s on edge, I think. They’re just waiting.”

For what?

“They’re waiting for somebody big to come to town—Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, Tom Brokaw. If Tom Brokaw came, then it would be real.”

Joe Gorline, Dottie’s ex-husband, loves working at the bomb plant, as his father did. From the start, Joe’s father told him, “This stuff is not good,” and Joe has been careful. His father died from chlorine-damaged lungs, but Joe has been loyal to the plant and to its important secret work.

He looks strong and healthy. He is tan and muscular, somewhat large in the middle, and has a long gray ponytail, fastened at intervals with colored rubber bands. He lives with his pit bull—Rottweiler, Baba Ram Dass (Bubba, for short). In his house are a Finnish 20-mm. antitank rifle and a Second World War German MG 34, and a safe filled with his gun collection.

Joe repairs equipment in what’s called the cascade—a six-hundred-mile complex of pipes which comprises the enrichment system. Uranium hexafluoride gas, or UF₆, is sieved repeatedly in the cascade to get a richer concentration of uranium—a panning-for-gold procedure. Joe might replace joint seals or weld pipes that carry UF₆. For such work, he wears a safety suit with a respirator. “I call it my banana suit,” he told me. “It’s yellow, with yellow rubber boots, orange gloves.”

Orange gloves? I asked.

“It’s a statement,” he said with a grin. “Accessories are everything.”

Doesn’t he get hot in that suit?

“Oh, I’m used to the heat. But it’s noisy! It’s like being in the crankcase of your car. I haven’t heard a bird chirp in years.” He laughed and cupped his ear.

“I listen to the machines. My job is to keep things running. After a while, you want it to run. You develop pride in your work.”

Wasn’t he afraid of radioactivity?

“There’s nothing out there now that scares me. The safety has improved. But if anybody got big doses I did. Fifteen years ago, the same place I’d go now in my banana suit, I went in with rubber boots. We’d get covered with black oxide dust.

“And you’re also trailing in the polls.”
and it would be all over us, and then
we'd go to the cafeteria and wallow
around. I got UF₆ and black oxide in
my mouth and eyes." He laughed. "It
tastes terrible!"

He showed me a small crater on the
side of his nose, where he was burned
by fluorine. "It would condense on a
vent and drip over the door. One day, a
guy went out the door and something
dripped on his nose. He went nuts. He
thought he'd been burned until we
yelled, 'No, that's just pigeon shit!' But it
dripped on me one day. My nose started
smoking on the end. When you start
smoking, you have to go to the dispensary.
One guy's nose was worse than mine. It was flat."

I knew I ought to see the plant, but
I wasn't sure I wanted to. I'm health-
conscious. I consume antioxidants,
count fat molecules, pick organic turnip
greens. Did I really need to go on a
treasure hunt for transuranics? Should I
carry a Geiger counter? Wear throw-
away shoes?

I rode to the plant with Joe in his
old Chevrolet truck. He flicked his cig-
arette discreetly out the cracked-open
window. Paducah's urban sprawl is
westward, toward the plant. Around
the mall are the typical clusters of ugliness
which define America. In the subdivi-
sions, Ten Commandments signs had
sprouted in people's yards. The tall
houses in the extravagant new develop-
ments looked overpriced and too close
together, but I was glad that at least
they weren't usurping all the fine farml-
land. Just past Future City, we turned
onto a road that led to the plant, lined
with small farms and modest homes.
The corn was dying.

"The soybeans are strangely green," I
said.

"It's plutonium that does it," Joe said.
"All that radiation."

Sometimes you have to take what
Joe says with a grain of greensalt.

The plant, which occupies a fenced-
in area nearly the size of Central Park,
is a sprawling gray complex. The archi-
tecture resembles the back end of a
shopping mall. Right away, I noticed
what was stored in the front yard—the
blue cylinders of depleted uranium,
rows and rows of them. Each of these
cylinders—there are thirty-seven thou-
sand of them—weights between ten and
fourteen tons. They made me think of a
stockpile of pods from "Invasion of the
Body Snatchers." The cylinders will be
there until someone figures out an econ-
omy way to recover the last traces of
valuable uranium in them. In the mean-
time, everyone hopes that they won't
rust, or leak—or explode.

As we drove around the outskirts of
the plant, I glimpsed some of the "hot
spots" the Washington Post had written
about—small areas where toxic waste
had been spilled or buried or dumped.
They were roped off and low to the
ground, with little warning signs. At
one time, five hundred picocuries of
plutonium were detected on the plant
grounds—thirty-three times what the
government deemed an acceptable stan-
dard at blast sites in the South Pacific.
Some of the buildings are so heavily
contaminated that they have been aban-
donned, and, unfortunately, wildlife now
live in them.

The plant itself is not a reassuring
image: it's aging and corroding. There
are six processing buildings, and they
are all hooked together with pipes—
long, unsupported, seemingly precarious
overhead pipes. I was trying to grasp
the way the plant worked, the way
the gas was pumped through a network
of compressors and converters—the
cascade. It was such a mysterious con-
cept—waterfalls, something beautifully
flowing—that for a moment I almost
wanted to see it. My sister saw it once
when she worked in the safety depart-
ment. A supervisor took her inside one
of the big buildings which housed part
of the cascade. He wanted to show her
what their work was all about.

We turned north, on a gravel road
alongside the chain-link fence, and
spectacular waste dumps came into
view: the rusty scrap heap, the old cylin-
ders, the giant mound of crushed fifty-
gallon drums (Drum Mountain, it's
called). Uranium, radionuclides, "ura-
nium daughters" (a phrase that captured
my fancy), and transuranics infused
these collections like mildew in damp
clothes. Neptunium, plutonium, tech-
neutonium, old kitchen sinks—it all seemed
to be here in the scrap piles, as common-
looking as a junk yard of wrecked cars.
In a way, the scene seemed normal. It's
a time-honored rural practice to save
your trash in the yard—what won't fit
on the porch. You dam the creeks with
old mattress springs and broken refrig-
erators, to stop soil erosion. An earth-
quake on the dreaded New Madrid
fault could turn this region, embraced
by the Ohio, Mississippi, Tennessee, and
Cumberland Rivers, into mush. Where
would all this irradiated trash wind up
then?

The plant had been built on a thirty-
four-hundred-acre federal property,
where the old munitions plant—the
original Kentucky Ordnance Works, or the K.O.W., as it was called—operated during the Second World War. Most of the land that surrounds the plant is the wildlife area and extends almost to the Ohio River. Joe was driving through this wilderness now. I knew that there were still toxic chemicals from the ordnance works in the ground. (The K.O.W. had manufactured TNT.) And now radioactive pollution had spread through this area. The Washington Post said that two dozen radioactive rubble piles from the bomb plant dotted the landscape, but I didn't see any. Radioactivity was an invisible, ghostly presence.

"Over there's a great pond for frogs," Joe said. "I used to frog gig there a lot with my son."

We passed other ponds, where recently the fish had been killed so that nobody would eat them. People have hunted and fished here for decades; no one wants to throw back a good catch. I was aware that this wildlife area is virtually sacred. People feel so deeply about hunting here that they would be up in arms, so to speak, if the area were condemned because of mere toxic waste. We twisted and turned down gravel roads; then we were in the scrubby fields, driving on what were just old worn paths that Joe said he knew by heart.

"I love this old truck!" he burst out gleefully as we bounced over a bump. The tracks ran beneath thick weeds and tall grass. We were in a labyrinth of ancient trails. In a clearing, we passed a group of teen-agers slouching around a pickup truck, playing hooky. This park is where kids come to party. Joe told me, and schoolchildren have picnics in these fields, where, over the years, thirty tons of uranium were flushed into the streams, saturating the earth, and recently an unmarked pile of contaminated railroad crossties was discovered.

We passed a pair of sirens on poles, with signs—what to do if the siren sounds. (Basically, run for at least two miles.) A concrete water tower loomed ahead, then another and another. We were among the ruins of the ordnance works—concrete hulks. Vines crawled over the gray shapes. Even though nature was taking over, the landscape itself was a ruin, shrivelled by the drought, the sumac and sassafras reddening prematurely.

I had lost my sense of direction, and didn't fancy crawling through scrubland fertilized by uranium or TNT, but Joe wasn't bothered. It was a hot day. He had a jug of water and a cooler of Cokes. I clutched my bottle of water from France. We got out of the truck and waded through thickseed and ironweed, then down a gravel path. Joe, sockless in sandals, reminisced about youthful outings here as we peered inside some of the dank old buildings. They were dark, with graffiti-covered walls. A disintegrating couch, its stuffing spewing, sat beneath some lingering asbestos that hung from the ceiling like Spanish moss.

I was either in a gothic romance novel or in an apocalyptic Italian movie. I faced a wall, spray-painted with a message: "Live in Fear, the End is Near."

I felt suddenly uncomfortable to be in a place that had an unhealthy obsession with bombs and guns and other inidious things that kill people. I saw the K.O.W. as the ancestor of the bomb plant, and I knew the plant was creating its own ineradicable legacy. The sins of the past—uranium daughters—lay strewn over the landscape and in the water and under the earth. From TNT-based weaponry in the Second World War to the first atomic bombs and the nuclear stockpiles of the Cold War, the wartime urgency left a habit of mind and a profusion of poisons.

Dottie had shown me a photograph Joe took of her out here. She was standing in an open window in one of these ruined buildings, and in the photo the light had created an apparition above her head, merging with her bright hair. She said it looked like a dove, but its glaring whiteness reminded me of an atomic blast.

On another day, screwing up my courage, I returned to the plant alone, determined to see the cascade for myself—heat and noise and all. It was a bleak, gray, rainy day, but after the drought I was glad to see it. I was in my rain gear, with bright-yellow boots. I wished I had Joe's banana suit.

My guide wore a thermoluminescent dosimeter, a radiation-monitoring badge, but she said that I didn't need one, since I wouldn't be allowed anywhere in the plant where there might be radiation. I was a little disappointed but mostly relieved. I was allowed into the control center, a round domed concrete building. Inside, on the curved wall, was an immense diagram of pipes and com-
pressors and converters and electric motors. It was fifties technology, intricate but decidedly pre-Microsoft. It was like the cockpit of Captain Video's spaceship. The diagram on the wall, with lots of red and green lights and dials, mimicked the cascade. The whole system has never been shut down since it started, in 1952. If it were shut down, the gas would cool and turn into a solid, and the cascade would clog up like a cholesterol-choked artery. A gauge on the wall—like a big clock—had a dial indicating the gas level.

I was left to imagine the mighty cascade. It was like a Ruble Goldberg cartoon version of the human circulatory system—the crudest technology for something as mysterious as a beating heart. The heart of the mystery of atomic energy, its deadly magic, was a mundane industrial process. Somehow, I could picture Lucy and Ethel in here, running this thing.

The onset of autumn brought a startling revelation: an accidental uncontrolled nuclear chain reaction was theoretically possible in the plant. Paduchaj jumped out of its time warp, crashing into the twenty-first century. People were confused and scared. Energy Secretary Richardson visited and promised the moon. He apologized for the plutonium. The plant was buzzing with investigators. Joe E-mailed me, "During the day the plant is a hotbed of activity, auditors everywhere. They don't know whether to shit or go blind." In September, a ten-billion-dollar class-action lawsuit was filed against facility contractors, including Union Carbide and Lockheed Martin, claiming, among other things, mental distress and "unjust enrichment." Joe wouldn’t join it, and he had no kind words for whistle-blowers. "If I get cancer, I don't even want to know," he told me.

I've been trying to put my finger on why, for so long, Paduchaj remained passive in the face of danger, some thing I feel I know intuitively as an insider but which seems to befuddle outsiders. Why did the workers who trust some of the government contractors that ran the plant? Did they really believe that giant corporations would look out for their well-being? How could they have been so innocent? Is that how those contractors got away with their colossal abuses?

These are post-Vietnam questions. The same people who are asking these questions seem a bit wistful about the virtues of small towns. All I can say is that such things exist. People here haven’t yet plunged into the frantic greed frenzy of the big time. They're independent, proud people—agrarian, basically. They don’t want to be told what to do—like “don’t hunt on the wildlife refuge”—but once a bargain is made and a trust is built, as it was with the plant from the beginning, they will honor it and they will do as they are asked. It was more than high-paying jobs. Neighborliness, not litigiousness, has always been the norm around here, and the social contract meant getting along by going along. The problem was that the plant had been a good neighbor. It was good to its workers, who kept the secret well.

I'm drawn again to Future City. At the intersection, it seems that the future is nuclear fallout in one direction and guns in the schools in the other. I turn north, toward Heath High School. Driving up, I see kids across the road at band practice. A banner outside the entrance of the school reads, "Rising to the Challenge." Inside, in the lobby, fourteen-year-old Michael Carnes opened fire on the prayer group two years ago. The Paduchaj Gaseous Diffusion Plant—a good neighbor— contributed generously to the memorial fund for the three dead girls.

I recall that, for some of the students, the instinctive reaction to the massacre was forgiveness. They painted banners that said "We forgive you, Michael" and "We love you, Mike."

And that's the heart of the story. This turning the other cheek, the strange embrace of sudden horror, startled outsiders. The students' anger came later, when grief had set in and the lawyers showed up, but their initial acceptance—their passive non-resistance—was not so surprising in an agricultural region, where farmers forgo the forces they cannot control. Droughts and pesti lence are risks the farmer takes at every planting time in every hopeful spring.