

# Hiroshima

John Hersey

*When the first atom bomb was dropped on 6 August 1945,  
it devastated a great city and knocked Japan out of the war.*

*John Hersey, the distinguished American writer, was sent nine months later  
to Hiroshima to find out in human and not scientific terms,  
what had happened. Little over a year after the event his account appeared  
in the **New Yorker** (occupying a complete issue) and as a Penguin.*

*Hersey's unforgettable narrative, which is built round the  
experiences of six survivors in a city where some 100,000 men,  
women and children were killed, is now a Penguin Modern Classic.  
It supplies an epitaph to those who died in one of history's most  
catastrophic events and a grave warning to the present and the future.*

## PUBLISHERS' NOTE

ON Monday 6 August 1945 a new era in human history opened. After years of intensive research and experiment, conducted in their later stages mainly in America, by scientists of many nationalities, Japanese among them, the forces which hold together the constituent particles of the atom had at last been harnessed to man's use: and on that day man used them. By a decision of the American military authorities, made, it is said, in defiance of the pre-tests of many of the scientists who had worked on the project, an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. As a direct result, Some 60,000 Japanese men, women, and children were killed, and 100,000 injured; and almost the whole of a great seaport, a city of 250,000 people, was destroyed by blast or by fire. As an indirect result, a few days later, Japan acknowledged defeat, and the Second World War came to an end.

For many months little exact and reliable news about the details of the destruction wrought by the first atomic bomb reached Western readers. Millions of words were written, in Europe and America, explaining the

marvellous new powers that science had placed in men's hands; describing the researches and experiments that had led up to this greatest of all disclosures of Nature's secrets: discussing the problems for man's future which the new weapon raised. Argument-waxed furious as to the ethics of the bomb: should the Japanese have received advance warning of America's intention to use it. Should a demonstration bomb have been exploded in the presence of enemy observers in some remote spot where it would do a minimum of damage, " a warning to the Japanese people, before its first Serious use 2 But of the feelings and reactions of the people of Hiroshima to the bomb, nothing, or at least nothing that was not pure imagination, could be written; for nothing was known.

In May 1946, the New Yorker sent John Hersey, journalist and author of *A Bell for Adano*, to the Far East to find out what really happened at Hiroshima: to interview survivors of the catastrophe, to endeavour to describe what they had seen and felt and thought, what the destruction of their city, their lives and homes and hopes and friends, had meant to them - in short, the cost of the bomb in terms of human suffering and reaction to Suffering. He stayed in Japan for a month, gathering his own material with little, if any, help from the occupying authorities; he obtained the stories from actual witnesses. The characters in his account are living individuals, not composite types. The story is their own story, told as far as possible in their own words. On 31 August 1946, Hersey's story was made public. For the first time in the New Yorker's career an issue appeared which, within the familiar covers, bearing - for such covers are prepared long in advance - a picnic scene, carried no satire, no cartoons, no fiction, no verse or smart quips or shopping notes: nothing but its advertisement matter and Hersey's 30,000-word story.

That story is built round the experiences of six people who were in Hiroshima when the bomb dropped, each of whom, by some strange chance, escaped, not unscathed, but at least with life. One, a Roman Catholic missionary priest, was a German; the other five were Japanese: a Red Cross hospital doctor, another doctor with a private practice, an office girl, a Protestant clergyman, and a tailor's widow. For some time after the bomb had fallen, none of them knew exactly what had happened: they hardly realized that their old familiar life had ended, that they had been chosen by chance, or destiny, or - as two of them at any rate would have put it - by God, to be helpless small-part actors in an unparalleled tragedy. Bit by bit

came the awakening to the magnitude of the calamity that had removed, in a flash, nearly all their accustomed world.

Hersey's vivid yet matter-of-fact story tells what the bomb did to each of these six people, through the hours and the days that followed its impact on their lives. It is written soberly, with no attempt whatever to 'pile on the agony' - the presentation at times is almost cold in its economy of words. To six ordinary men and women, at the time and afterwards, it seemed - like this.

The *New Yorker's* original intention was to make the story a serial. But in an inspired moment the paper's editors saw that it must be published as a single whole and decided to devote a whole issue to Hersey's master-piece of reconstruction. For ten days Hersey feverishly rewrote and polished his story, handing it out by instalments to the printers, and no hint of what was in the air escaped from the New Yorker office. On 31 August, in the paper's usual format, the historic issue appeared. It created a first-order sensation in American journalistic history: a few hours after publication the issue was sold out. Applications poured in for permission to serialize the story in other American journals, among them the *New York Herald Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Sun*, and *Boston Globe*. A condensed version - the cuts personally approved by Hersey - was broadcast in four instalments by the American Broadcasting Company. Some fifty newspapers in the US, eventually obtained permission to use the story in serial form, the copyright fees, after tax deduction, at Hersey's direction going to the American Red Cross. Albert Einstein ordered a thousand copies of the *New Yorker* containing the story. Even stage rights were sought from the author, though he refused to give permission for dramatization. British newspapers and press syndicates immediately cabled for reproduction rights: but the New Yorker's executives insisted that no cutting could be permitted, and with British paper rationing, full newspaper publication was seen to be impracticable. The book production rights for the United States were Secured by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and the American Book of the Month Club chose it for publication as an 'Extra'; and the BBC obtained permission to broadcast the article in full in four episodes as part of their new Third Programme,

Penguin Books, feeling that Hersey's story should receive the widest possible circulation in Great Britain, immediately cabled to Alfred A. Knopf for, and were accorded, permission to issue it complete in book form. It

appeared in November 1946 - save for following English spelling conventions - in an edition of 250,000 copies, exactly as it appeared in the pages of the *New Yorker*.

Many accounts have been published telling - so far as Security considerations allow - how the atom bomb works. But here, for the first time, is not a description of scientific triumphs, of intricate machines, new elements, and mathematical formulas but an account of what the bomb does - seen through the eyes of some of those to whom it did it: of those who endured one of the world's most catastrophic experiences, and lived.

*The following note appeared in the NEW YORKER of 31 August 1946, as an introduction to John Hersey's article*

*The NEW YORKER this week devotes its entire editorial space to an article on the almost complete obliteration of a city by one atomic bomb, and what happened to the people of that city. It does so in the conviction that few of us have yet comprehended the all but incredible destructive power of this weapon, and that everyone might well take time to consider the terrible implications of its use.*

## ONE

### A Noiseless Flash

AT exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning, on 6 August 1945 Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department at the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl at the next desk. At that same moment, Dr. Masakazu Fujii was settling down cross-legged to read the Osaka Asahi on the porch of his private hospital, overhanging one of the seven deltaic rivers which divide Hiroshima; Mrs Hatsuyo Nakamura, a tailor's widow, stood by the window of her kitchen watching a neighbour tearing down his house because it lay in the path of an air-raid-defence fire lane; Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a German priest of the Society of Jesus, reclined in his underwear on a cot on the top floor of his order's three-storey mission house, reading a Jesuit magazine, *Stimmen der Zeit*; Dr Terufumi Sasaki, a young member of the surgical staff of the city's large, modern Red Cross Hospital, walked along one of the hospital corridors with a blood

specimen for a Wassermann test in his hand; and the Reverend Mr Kiyoshi Tanimoto, pastor of the Hiroshima Methodist Church, paused at the door of a rich man's house in Koi, the city's western suburb, and prepared to unload a handcart full of things he had evacuated from town in fear of the massive B-29 raid which everyone expected Hiroshima to suffer. A hundred thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb, and these six were among the survivors. They still wonder why they lived when so many others died. Each of them counts many small items of chance or volition - a step taken in time, a decision to go indoors, catching one street-car instead of the next - that spared him. And now each knows that in the act of survival he lived a dozen lives and saw more death than he ever thought he would see. At the time none of them knew anything.

The Reverend Mr Tanimoto got up at five o'clock that morning. He was alone in the parsonage, because for some time his wife had been commuting with their year-old baby to spend nights with a friend in Ushida, a suburb to the north. Of all the important cities of Japan, only two, Kyoto and Hiroshima, had not been visited in strength by *B-san*, or Mr B, as the Japanese with a mixture of respect and unhappy familiarity, called the B-29; and Mr Tanimoto, like all neighbours and friends, was almost sick with anxiety. He had heard uncomfortably detailed accounts of mass raids on Kure, Iwakuni, Tokuyama, and other nearby towns; he was sure Hiroshima's turn would come soon. He had slept badly the night before, because there had been several air-raid warnings. Hiroshima had been getting such warnings almost every night for weeks, for at that time the B-29s were using Lake Biwa, northeast of Hiroshima, as a rendezvous point, and no matter what city the Americans planned to hit, the Super-fortresses streamed in over the coast near Hiroshima. The frequency of the warnings and the continued abstinence of Mr B with respect to Hiroshima had made its citizens jittery; a rumour was going around that the Americans were saving something special for the city.

Mr Tanimoto is a small man, quick to talk, laugh, and cry. He wears his black hair parted in the middle and rather long; the prominence of the frontal bones just above his eyebrows and the smallness of his moustache, mouth, and chin give him a strange, old- young look, boyish and yet wise, weak and yet fiery. He moves nervously and fast, but with a restraint which suggests that he is a cautious, thoughtful man. He showed, indeed, just those qualities in the uneasy days before the bomb fell. Besides having his wife spend the nights in Ushida, Mr Tanimoto had been carrying all the portable things

from his church, in the close-packed residential district called Nagaragawa, to a house that belonged to a rayon manufacturer in Koi, two miles from the centre of town. The rayon man, a Mr Matsui, had opened his then unoccupied estate to a large number of his friends and acquaintances, so that they might evacuate whatever they wished to a safe distance from the probable target area. Mr Tanimoto had no difficulty in moving chairs, hymnals, Bibles, altar gear, and church records by pushcart himself, but the organ console and an upright piano required some aid. A friend of his named Matsuo had, the day before, helped him get the piano out to Koi; in return, he had promised this: day to assist Mr Matsuo in hauling out a daughter's belongings. That is why he had risen so early.

Mr Tanimoto cooked his own breakfast, He felt awfully tired. The effort of moving the piano the day before, a sleepless night, weeks of worry and unbalanced diet, the cares of his parish - all combined to make him feel hardly adequate to the new day's work. There was another thing, too: Mr Tanimoto had studied theology at Emory College, in Atlanta, Georgia, he had graduated in 1949; he spoke excellent English; he dressed in American clothes; he had corresponded with many American friends right up to the time the war began; and among a people obsessed with a fear of being spied upon - perhaps almost obsessed himself - he found himself growing increasingly uneasy. The police had questioned him several times, and just a few days before, he had heard that an influential acquaintance, a Mr Tanaka a retired officer of the Toyo Kisen Kaisha steamship line, an anti-Christian, a man famous in Hiroshima for his showy philanthropies and notorious for his personal tyrannies, had been telling people that Tanimoto should not be trusted. In compensation, to show himself publicly a good Japanese, Mr Tanimoto had taken on the chairmanship of his local *tonarigumi*, or Neighbourhood Association, and to his other duties and concerns this position had added the business of organizing air-raid defence for about twenty families.

Before six o'clock that morning, Mr Tanimoto started for Mr Matsuo's house. There he found that their burden was to be a *tansu*, a large Japanese cabinet, full of clothing and household goods. The two men set out. The morning was perfectly clear and so warm that the day promised to be uncomfortable. A few minutes after they started, the air-raid siren went off - a minute-long blast that warned of approaching planes but indicated to the people of Hiroshima only a slight degree of danger, since it sounded every morning at this time, when an American weather plane came over. The two

men pulled and pushed the handcart through the city streets. Hiroshima was a fan-shaped city, lying mostly on the six islands formed by the seven estuarial rivers that branch out from the Ota River; its main commercial and residential districts, covering about four square miles in the centre of the city, contained three-quarters of its population, which had been reduced by several evacuation programmes from a wartime peak of 380,000 to about 245,000. Factories and other residential districts, or suburbs, lay compactly around the edges of the city. To the south were the docks, an airport, and an island-studded Inland Sea. A rim of mountains runs around the other three sides of the delta. Mr Tanimoto and Mr Matsuo took their way through the shopping centre, already full of people, and across two of the rivers to (the sloping streets of Koi, and up them to the outskirts and foot-hills. As they started up a valley away from the tight-ranked houses, the all-clear sounded. (The Japanese radar operators, detecting only three planes, supposed that they comprised a reconnaissance.) Pushing the handcart up to the rayon man's house was tiring, and the men, after they had manoeuvred their load into the driveway and to the front steps, paused to rest awhile. They stood with a wing of the house between them and the city. Like most homes in this part of Japan, the house consisted of a wooden frame and wooden walls supporting a heavy tile roof. Its front hall, packed with rolls of bedding and clothing, looked like a cool cave full of fat cushions. Opposite the house, to the right of the front door, there was a large, finicky rock garden. There was no sound of planes. The morning was still; the place was cool and pleasant.

Then a tremendous flash of light cut across the Sky. Mr Tanimoto has a distinct recollection that it travelled from east to west, from the city towards the hills. It seemed a sheet of sun. Both he and Mr Matsuo reacted in terror - and both had time to react (for they were 3,500 yards, or two miles, from the centre of the explosion). Mr Matsuo dashed up the front steps into the house and dived among the bed-rolls and buried himself there. Mr Tanimoto took four or five steps and threw himself between two big rocks in the garden. He belled up very hard against one of them. As his face was against the stone he did not see what happened. He felt a sudden pressure, and then splinters and pieces of board and fragments of tile fell on him. He heard no roar. (Almost no one in Hiroshima recalls hearing any noise of the bomb. But a fisherman in his sampan on the Inland Sea near Tsuzu, the man with whom Mr Tanimoto's mother-in-law and sister-in-law were living, saw the flash and heard a tremendous explosion; he was nearly twenty miles from Hiroshima, but the thunder was greater than when the B-29s hit Iwakuni, only five miles away.)

When he dared, Mr Tanimoto raised his head and saw that the rayon man's house had collapsed. He thought a bomb had fallen directly on it. Such clouds of dust had risen that there was a sort of twilight around. In panic, not thinking for the moment of Mr Matsuo under the ruins, he dashed out into the street. He noticed as he ran that the concrete wall of the estate had fallen over - towards the house rather than away from it. In the street, the first thing he saw was a squad of soldiers who had been burrowing into the hillside opposite, making one of the thousands of dugouts in which the Japanese apparently intended to resist invasion, hill by hill, life for life; the soldiers were coming out of the hole, where they should have been safe, and blood was running from their heads, chests, and backs. They were silent and dazed.

Under what seemed to be a local dust cloud, the day grew darker and darker.

At nearly midnight, the night before the bomb was dropped, an announcer on the city's radio station said that about two hundred B-29s were approaching southern Honshu and advised the population of Hiroshima to evacuate to their designated 'safe areas'. Mrs Hatsuyo Nakamura, the tailor's widow who lived in the section called Nobori-cho and who had long had a habit of doing as she was told, got her three children - a ten-year-old boy, Toshio, an eight-year-old girl, Yaeko, and a five-year-old girl, Myeko - out of bed and dressed them and walked with them to the military area known as the East Parade Ground, on the north-east edge of the city. There she unrolled some mats and the children lay down on them. They slept until about two, when they were awakened by the roar of the planes going over Hiroshima. As soon as the planes had passed, Mrs Nakamura started back with her children. They reached home a little after two-thirty and she immediately turned on the radio, which, to her distress, was just then broadcasting a fresh warning. When she looked at the children and saw how tired they were, and when she thought of the number of trips they had made in past weeks, all to no purpose, to the East Parade Ground, she decided that in spite of the instructions on the radio, she simply could not face starting out all over again. She put the children in their bedrolls on the floor, lay down herself at three o'clock, and fell asleep at once, so soundly that when planes passed over later, she did not waken to their sound.

The siren jarred her awake at about seven. She arose, dressed quickly, and hurried to the house of Mr Nakamoto, the head of her Neighbourhood





quarters of a mile, from the centre of the explosion) when something picked her up and she seemed to fly into the next room over the raised sleeping platform, pursued by parts of her house.

Timbers fell around her as she landed, and a shower of tiles pommelled her; everything became dark, for she was buried. The debris did not cover her deeply. She rose up and freed herself. She heard a child cry, 'Mother, help me!' and saw her youngest - Myeko, the five-year-old - buried UP to her breast and unable to move, As Mrs Nakamura started frantically to claw her way towards the baby, she could see or hear nothing of her other children.

Association, and asked him what she should do. He said that she should remain at home -unless an urgent warning - a series of intermittent blasts of the siren - was sounded. She returned home, lit the stove in the kitchen, set some rice to cook, and sat down to read that morning's Hiroshima *Chugoku*. To her relief, the all-clear sounded at eight o'clock. She heard the children stirring, so she went and gave each of them a handful of peanuts and told them to stay on their bedrolls, because they were tired from the night's walk. She had hoped that they would go back to sleep, but the man in the house directly to the south began to make a terrible hullabaloo of hammering, wedging, ripping, and splitting. The prefectural government, convinced, as everyone in Hiroshima was, that the city would be attacked soon, had begun to press with threats and warnings for the completion of wide fire lanes, which, it was hoped, might act in conjunction with the rivers to localize any fires started by an incendiary raid; and the neighbour was reluctantly sacrificing his home to the city's safety. Just the day before, the prefecture had ordered all able-bodied girls from the secondary schools to spend a few days helping to clear these lanes, and they started work soon after the all clear sounded.

Mrs Nakamura went back to the kitchen, looked at the rice, and begun watching the man next door. At first she was annoyed with him for making so much noise, but then she was moved almost to tears by pity. Her emotion was specifically directed towards her neighbour, tearing down his home, board by board, at a time when there was so much unavoidable destruction, but undoubtedly she also felt a generalized community pity, to say nothing of self-pity. She had not had an easy time. Her husband, Isawa, had gone into the army just after Myeko was born, and she had heard nothing from or of him for a long time, until, on 5 March 1942, she received a seven-word telegram: 'Isawa died an honourable death at Singapore.' She learned later that he had died on 15 February, the day Singapore fell, and that he had been a corporal. Isawa had not been a particularly prosperous tailor, and his only capital was a Sankoku sewing machine. After his death, when his allotments Stopped coming. Mrs Nakamura got out the machine and began to take in piecework herself, and since then had supported the children, but poorly, by sewing.

As Mrs Nakamura stood watching her neighbour, everything flashed whiter than any white she had ever seen. She did not notice what happened to the man next door; the reflex of a mother set her in motion towards her children. She had taken a single step (the house was 1,350 yards, or three

quarters of a mile, from the centre of the explosion) when something picked her up and she seemed to fly into the next room over the raised sleeping platform, pursued by parts of her house.

Timbers fell around her as she landed, and a shower of tiles pommelled her; everything became dark, for she was buried. The debris did not cover her deeply. She rose up and freed herself. She heard a child cry, 'Mother, help me!' and saw her youngest - Myeko, the five-year-old - buried UP to her breast and unable to move, As Mrs Nakamura started frantically to claw her way towards the baby, she could see or hear nothing of her other children.